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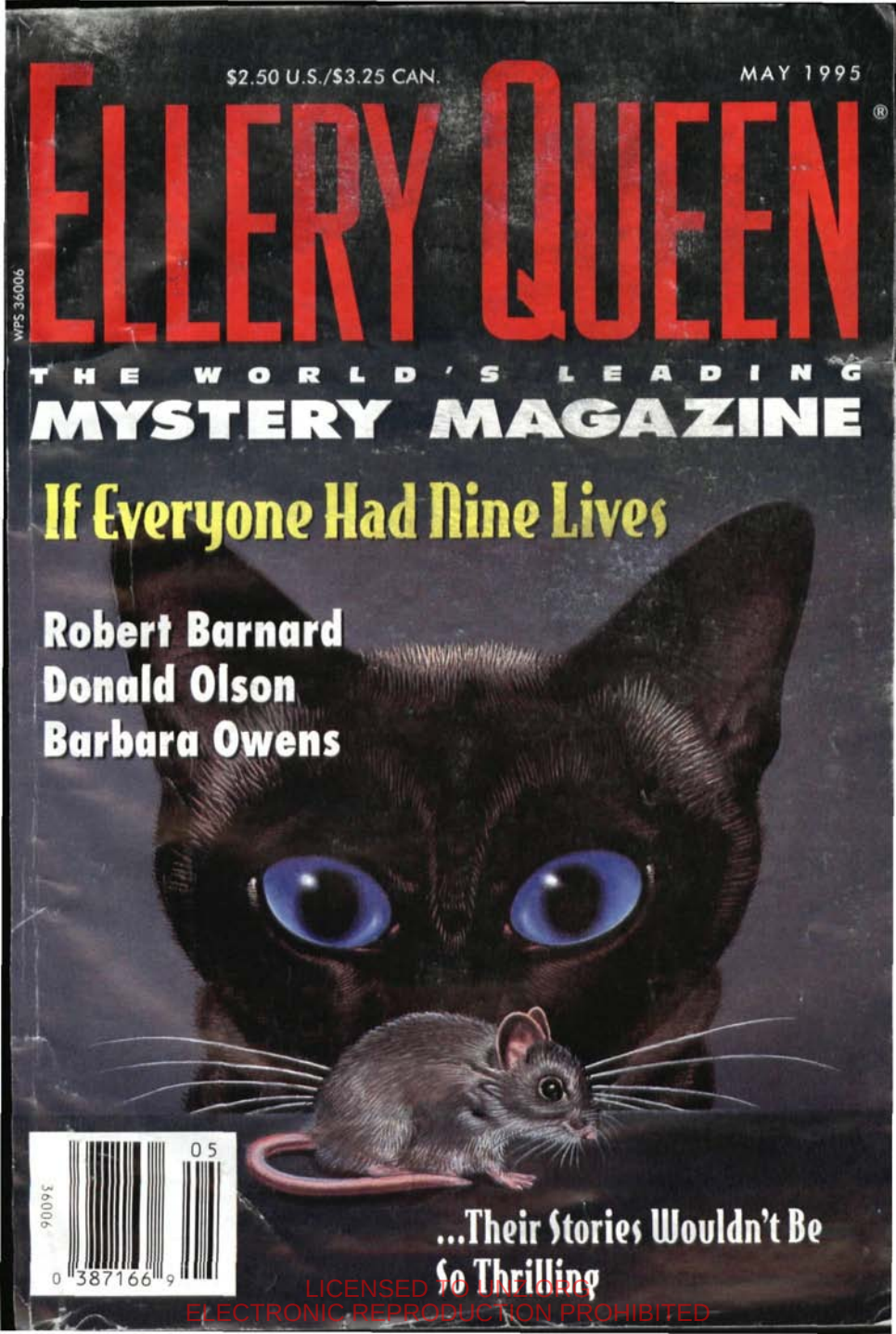
THE WORLD'S LEADING

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

If Everyone Had Nine Lives

Robert Barnard
Donald Olson
Barbara Owens



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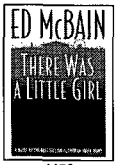

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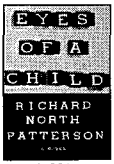

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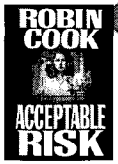

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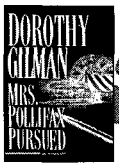

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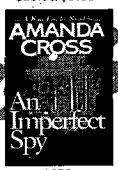

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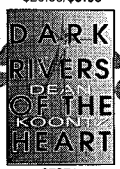

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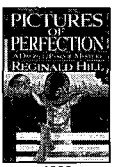

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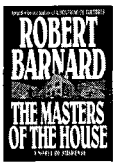

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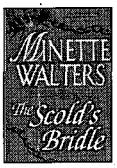

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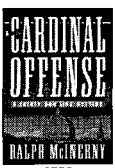

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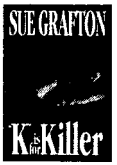

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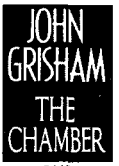

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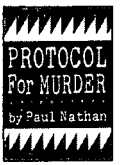

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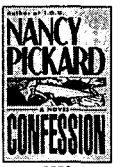

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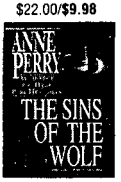

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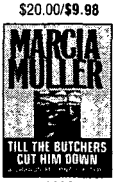

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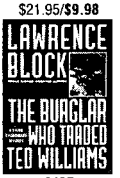

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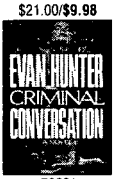

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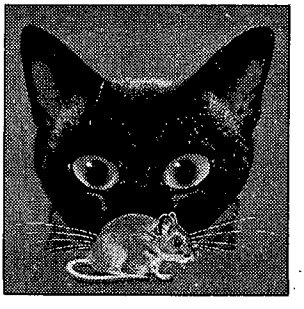

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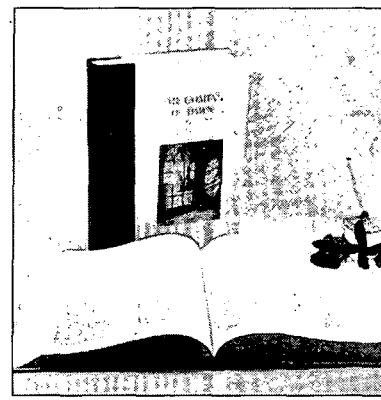
Poetry Contest $24,000 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes in coming months



The Coming of Dawn, featured above, is one of NLP's recent deluxe hardbound anthologies.

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that $24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry, "we have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in one original poem, any subject, any style to:

The National Library of Poetry
11419 Cronridge Drive
PO Box 704-6121
Owings Mills, MD 21117

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "Each poem received will be acknowledged, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Anthologies published by the organization have included, *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others. ■

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ROBERT BARNARD writing as

BERNARD BASTABLE

Bernard Bastable is better known to EQMM *readers as Robert Barnard, the author of dozens of stories for our magazine and several novels from Charles Scribner's Sons. Although he once described his books as old-fashioned* (Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers), *he is in fact one of the genre's most innovative writers, always attempting something out of the ordinary, even in his short fiction. In 1993 the author began a series of historical mysteries under the nearly transparent pseudonym Bernard Bastable (St. Martin's Press). He's decided to carry the Bastable byline over to his short fiction when the subject treated is historical, though we suspect that even if we had not identified him for you, his distinctive style might have been recognised. . . .*

READER, I STRANGLED HIM

by BERNARD BASTABLE

The restoration of Mr. Rochester's sight, as I remarked to the rector of Ferndean village, was indeed a blessing. The rector is a man of conventional mind and limited imagination, so I did not add that, like most blessings, it was not unmixed.

Mr. Rochester's past life had been narrated to me in all its thrilling, shocking detail by the firelight at Thornfield some years before. I cannot therefore pretend that his nature was a closed book to me. While my husband's optic orbs were bleared and clouded I was his sight: I led him, I described objects and weathers to him, I expounded from the public prints the thrilling events of the day—Napoleon's return from Elba, his hundred days of restored power, his defeat by our country's incomparable hero at Waterloo. By the time the Bour-

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bon monarch was once more uncertainly in the saddle in Paris, my husband's eyes were beginning to discern light, shapes, even colours. When our son began to walk his father could lead him around the garden unaided by me. By the time the Prince Regent became sovereign *de jure* as well as *de facto,* Edward Fairfax Rochester could read, write, and do everything of importance for himself. My importance in his life was greatly diminished.

And as his eyes cleared, so they began to roam: to wander, notice, and choose.

Let me be clear: I have never admired bloodless men. I counted myself fortunate to have married a man well versed in matters of the heart, and in their physical expression. To be with him was both thrilling in itself and educational. I could even, I think, have tolerated occasional episodes with housemaids and suchlike, as the expressions of a nature hot and unaccustomed to the restraints of convention.

But there are limits. An occasional episode is not to be confused with the constant pursuit of amorous experience. And when that constant pursuit resulted in a fading interest in his own wife, then my lamentations were bitter indeed. Now my visits to Ferndean village were marked by encounters with rustic maidens —*girls*—who curtsyed to me with their eyes fixed firmly on the ground. Nay, there were some who, when they thought they were past me, smirked. My position in the county, never secure by reason of my past as an educator of young ladies, became shaky indeed.

I made my unhappiness clear to Edward.

"I shall take Fairfax and go and live on one of your other properties," I said. "That way I shall avoid constant humiliation."

"You will do nothing of the sort," he said in his abrupt way. "That boy is the light of my life."

"*I* was once your light, and your eyes," I said bitterly.

"You are still, my sprite," he said, caressing my hand. "But now there are lesser lights."

I snatched my hand away.

"Then I will go and live somewhere with Fairfax on my own inheritance."

"You have no inheritance. You and I made no settlements before marriage. And a woman has no rights to her children."

I subsided into impotent rage, for he spoke no more than the legal, immoral truth.

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I was similarly worsted when, some time later, he brought up the subject of young Fairfax's education.

"Time we thought of a governess for the lad," he said one day at dinner.

"A governess! But I am quite capable of teaching Fairfax."

"You think so, my dear? My son needs more than charity-school learning. Besides, you are my wife, with your own duties. It would hardly help your position in the county to remind people of what you once were."

"My position in the county has already been undermined by your exercising a *droit du seigneur* on all the girls for miles around," I said, hardly bearing to look at him.

"You talk nonsense, Jane. The *droit du seigneur* has never existed in this country."

He pronounced the phrase in the French manner to underline my inferior education, and perhaps to remind me of his own extensive experience among French ladies of the most degraded type.

"By your exercising a *droit du seigneur,* I mean that you use your wealth and rank to force otherwise virtuous girls to agree to your embraces," I said. He shrugged.

"You say you see them in the village. Do they look reluctant or regretful?"

Once again I was reduced to silence.

I first saw the advertisement when it appeared in the *Leeds Intelligencer* and the *Bradford Argus*. It detailed the need of a substantial family of gentlefolk in Yorkshire for an educator (female) for their "amiable and intelligent only son," and it specified a time and a place for interviews of the applicants. I had not been consulted about the advertisement, so I said to my high-handed lord: "I insist on being present at the interviews."

"Of course, my dear," he replied meekly. "Your experience will be invaluable."

There were five ladies came for interview. Naturally my preference was for the quietest, most downtrodden of them. My choice, however, for various reasons, was for Mrs. Nelson, an elderly lady of forbidding mien but firm of manner and with strong religious principles. The one I feared most was Miss Grey, whose quiet, demure manner masked the fact that she had a pretty face and an inviting eye.

"Mrs. Nelson," I said when they had gone, "is undoubtedly the best candidate. She has far more experience than the rest, and will correct any tendency to wilfulness in the boy."

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"My sentiments entirely," Edward said, to my surprise. "The good Mrs. Nelson it shall be. With Miss Grey in reserve."

I wrote the letters for him to Mrs. Nelson. How he organised it I do not know, but within the week we had had a reply regretfully declining the position, as she had had an offer of a position which she could not refuse from the Yorkshire nobility.

Edward wrote the letter to Miss Grey himself.

Miss Grey replied accepting the post, but pleading to delay taking it up until her present charge should be ready to go to public school in September. Edward replied that the delay was no great matter, and we looked forward to welcoming her to Ferndean Manor as soon as was convenient to her.

The delay at least gave me time to plan. However, no plan could I come up with.

It must be said that as the weeks wore on and I was still unable to think of a strategy to prevent Miss Grey coming to Ferndean, or to prevent the near-inevitable when she did, my nerves became more than a little frayed. I was shrewish to my husband, which he richly deserved, but I was an irritable, distrait mother to young Fairfax, which he didn't. Thus matters stood one warm evening in early August, when the jangling of a bell announced a visitor. I was in the library, teaching Fairfax his first steps in arithmetic, when I heard John approach my husband in the sitting room.

"Good Lord!" I heard him say. Then he got up and approached the door that led to the hallway. "Mason! My good man! It's a tonic to see you!"

My heart sank. Those last words must surely have been ironic. It was never a tonic to see Mr. Mason, least of all for me. This pathetic, irresolute, unmanly creature was the man who had stepped in to prevent my marriage to Mr. Rochester when first he attempted to make me his in Hay Church. I should no doubt have been grateful to him for preventing my becoming a bigamous bride, but truth to tell I felt only aversion for the man.

"But what brings you here?" I heard my husband ask, after the bustle of welcome.

"I was in the county, wandering about at will, and the nearness of Ferndean made me irresistibly anxious to see—" He paused. I waited. "—my old friend and brother-in-law Edward Fairfax Rochester."

I had no doubt what in fact he had come to see. It was time that he saw it—saw me. I went to the sitting room with young Fairfax.

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"Mr. Mason. I am pleased to make your acquaintance again. This is Mr. Rochester's son and heir. Bed now, Fairfax. I shall be up in a minute or two. Now, you will stay to supper, Mr. Mason?"

"He will stay the night, and as many nights as he can," said my lord.

He engaged to stay that night only, and I hoped that was all I should be subjected to. He was the same unhealthy, unsatisfactory man he had been when I had first seen him. His desire to see me as lady of the house, rather than the family's obscure governess, did not further him in my good opinion. Over dinner he attempted compliments, beginning with young Fairfax.

"A fine boy, that I could see. A manly boy."

"I am endeavouring to make him into a man of *principle,*" I said quietly.

"And you, Mrs. Rochester—you clearly do a wonderful job in filling poor Bertha's place."

"There was no place that your sister filled," I said tartly.

"Oh, but she was a lovely creature, when I saw her first," said Mr. Rochester, stretching in his chair. Once I would have known that he was regarding me out of the corner of his eye, having only said such a thing to produce a reaction in me. Now I no longer knew whether he was sincere or not. Thus does marriage increase our uncertainty about our spouses.

They turned then to talk of the fall in the price of coffee and sugar, and when I said that the price of these commodities from the provision merchants was still as high as ever they looked at me pityingly and Edward explained that there was no immediate connection between the two prices. Then he turned back to Mr. Mason and continued to discuss male topics into which female interventions would be unwelcome. It was clear that he found Mason a more valued guest than he ever had in the past. Perhaps it was the lack of male company of his own class at Ferndean that had led to the change. Indeed, apart from John (who with Mary was still our only servant, in spite of all my representations) he for the most part had no male company of any kind at all. Men of the village he took care to avoid.

It was, for me, a most disagreeable meal. When it ended I pleaded a headache, leaving them to their port, and later their brandy and cigars. I went to my room, and without assuming any night attire I lay on the bed, wept a little, slept a little, and thought.

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It was towards midnight when I woke up from a doze, feeling my faculties as keen and alive as they had ever been. It was talking and laughter from downstairs that had woken me, and I realised that a window must be open. It became a craving in me to know what they were talking, what they were laughing about. I snatched a housecoat, crept down the stairs, and slipped through a side door out into the cool, scented air of the night garden.

It was the sitting-room window that was open, though the heavy curtains were closed. I could see nothing, but I could hear. To hear was more than enough. I heard Edward's manly, treacherous voice.

"I meant what I said, and more. Bertha was a creature to arouse the passions of more lethargic souls than I. She was a fire in the loins, and I had to have her. No doubt your family wanted to ensnare me, but I was desperate to be ensnared."

"Her mental state—her potential mental state—was quite unknown to us."

"Hrrrmph! Perhaps. In any case, I doubt if a doctor had sat me down and described the likely course of events it would have made a pennyworth of difference."

"And you have forgiven my intervention at Hay Church?"

"My dear fellow, knowing what you did, it was the only thing you could do. And you merely postponed the ev—the day."

"Thank you, my dear Edward. I merely did my duty, knowing what I did."

"Or thinking you knew what you did."

There was a moment's silence.

"Er . . . *thinking* I knew what I did?"

"Exactly," came my husband's slow, ironic voice. "It could not be explained at the time, of course."

"What could not be explained at the time?"

"Did it not occur to any of you in Jamaica that a hot-blooded young man, escaped from parental tyranny, might have got into other scrapes of a similar kind to the one you were preparing to entrap him into?"

"I don't understand, Edward—"

But I did! Or was beginning to!

"It could not be explained at the time of the interrupted marriage service, because it would hardly have altered the situation, but there had been a sweet little French *grisette* by the name of Amélie Labette, with whom my eighteen-year-old self went through a Catholic ceremony of undoubted legality."

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"But you mean—?"

"To the best of my knowledge she was still alive, still displaying to general admiration her many charms, when I married Bertha."

"And when you tried to marry your present charming partner?"

"I had no evidence she was dead. Hence my silence."

"But since then you have heard of her demise?"

The reply was a hearty—hearty!—laugh.

"Mason, you are priceless! A good deed in a naughty world. Come to bed, man—I'll lead you up."

My heart pounding as though it would burst from my breast, I fled down the garden. My throbbing temples pounded the message: "Unjust!" I had been trapped after all by Edward Rochester into a marriage that for all he knew was illegal. I was, as I had been so determined never to be, his concubine, his . . . I could not say the word, even to myself, but I was no better than his women in the village and the farms around.

No!—my conscience argued, angrily aroused: I was in every way better. I had been misused, deceived. It was Edward who was the misuser, the deceiver. It was Edward who was the criminal, the bigamist. He had taken my girlhood from me, robbed me of all innocence, and he had done it lightly, cynically, jeering internally at my scruples, my principles, my religious faith.

I walked slowly back to the house. It was Edward who had destroyed my life, Edward who had played the Lovelace, Edward who had broken me on the wheel.

I looked through the window. The curtain blew in the breeze, and I saw that, sitting at the table in the darkened room in one of the high-backed chairs, was a man's figure. I slipped back in through the side door and went to the sitting room. An odour wafted to me: It was the smell of one of Edward's cigars. It was sitting on the tray on the table, still dully smouldering. I felt my anger rising. He had laughingly told his friend I was no more than a bigamous houri, and now he was contentedly chuckling over the joke with a brandy and a cigar. I fingered the girdle of my wrap, then took it off and wound one end round my wrist.

Reader, I strangled him. I crept in silence across the room, stood behind the chair in the darkness, then with sudden strength brought the cord down around his throat and pulled it tight, tight, tight, exulting in my power, despising his feeble struggles, my brain proclaiming myself revenged for the terrible wrong he had done me. When all struggle ceased I ran to my room, locked the door, and

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threw myself on my bed weeping, until at last I subsided into an exhausted sleep. What would happen now would happen.

My slumbers were drugged, yet haunted by doubts and a nameless dread. In the morning heavy footsteps, cries, unaccustomed sounds about the house forced themselves on me but did not wake me. The sun was well up when I was aroused by a peremptory banging on the door. I cringed beneath the bedclothes, reluctant more than fearful. The knocking was resumed, and then:

"Jane! Open this door, if you do not want it to be broken down!"

It was the voice of my husband. The doubts and dreads of the night had been confirmed—doubts born, I am sure, from the lack of resistance of the man in the sitting room. My Edward would always have resisted.

I got up and took the key from the door to my chamber. Edward of course had his own key. He unlocked the door, came in, and stood in front of it, arms folded over his massive chest, almost covering the doorway.

"So. My wife is a murderess, is she? And what had you against poor Mason? Not the old affair at Hay Church, surely?"

"I did not like Mason," I murmured. "But I meant him no harm. It was—"

"Exactly. It was me. A charming intention!"

"You married me, not knowing—without even bothering to try to find out—whether our marriage was a legal one or not."

"So: You listen outside windows, do you?"

"*You* can accuse me of a petty thing like that? You, a disgrace to manhood? You deserved to die. I will go to the gallows gladly."

"You deserve to, certainly. Poor Mason, disturbed by what he had heard, goes down for a cigar—and I fear for a narcotic which is much used on his island. In his enfeebled state you strangle him, without bothering to ascertain that it is not your legal mate who is your victim as you intended. Certainly the noose would be a fit punishment."

"I shall go to my execution proclaiming my wrongs."

"All you would proclaim is your damnable inefficiency. In fact I do *not* care to have the name of Rochester dragged through the county courts and into the Newgate Calendar. It is hardly a spotless name, but it deserves better than that. Mr. Mason is already buried."

"Buried?"

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"In Dixon's field. It was easy work. John and Mary are loyal as dogs, and I praise God I engaged no new servants, as you desired."

"But when enquiries are made?"

"I believe there will be none. He was in the county incognito, told no one he was coming here."

"Then what about me? May Fairfax and I go, as I asked you, to one of your other properties and—"

"The devil take you, woman! Haven't I told you, no? Where is your sense of justice? There must be punishment, if there is to be true penitence. The attic room is ready for you."

"The attic room?"

"We have no true attics, but the old chamber at the end of the Elizabethan wing will suit admirably. I was, when a wild, stubborn boy, often locked in there. I found it admirably roomy. The four walls of that room will be the confines of your existence from now on. I have sent for a keeper, but for now I must simply lock you away. It is imperative that my son know nothing of the crimes of his mother."

He stood aside. I saw John and Mary on the landing, with no love in their faces, only condemnation and bewilderment. I stood up and went before them to my new prison.

I am very quiet here. Sometimes I read. Mr. Rochester does not shower me with books of devotion and contemplation (for hypocrisy is not one of his many faults), so I have the works of Sir Walter, the novels by the author of *Pride and Prejudice* (not greatly to my liking), and other works of a lighter kind. But for much of the time I sit quietly. I think and I listen.

Sometimes I hear the voice of my dear little boy calling to his dog in the grounds. Sometimes I hear him and *her,* the hated Miss Grey, in intervals of his schooling. Once, at night, when Grace was asleep, I heard the voices and laughter of my Edward and *her,* from the sitting room. Then the blood rushed to my head and I sat there for minute after minute, enduring its pounding, wondering if I was becoming in reality mad.

Grace Poole has convinced Edward she is a reformed character. She assures him that drink never touches her lips. He believes her because he would rather not involve anyone else from the lower orders in the sad affairs of his family.

Where her drink comes from I no more than suspect. Some member of her family brings it, I believe, and conveyes it to her during

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he Methodistical church service which she attends every Sunday. She makes good use of it at night.

Next month my dear Fairfax goes to stay with his "aunts" Diana and Mary. They have been very pressing that since I am so occupied !) they must see him. Edward has agreed.

Next month it must be then.

I have my rush light. I have my wits about me, which Bertha never had. One night when Grace is in her usual drunken stupor I shall sally forth and . . .

I shall have no regrets for Grace, for *her,* or for myself. Least of all shall I have regrets for Edward Fairfax Rochester. I have discovered the difference between a man and a woman. Women forge ahead, progress, put the past behind them, and go onwards. Men are circular creatures, going not onwards but around, their lives becoming a dreary repetition of their old mistakes.

Put vulgarly, they never learn. ●

"All right, break it up."

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1994 READERS AWARD

Photo by Teresa Salgado

A newcomer to *EQMM,* Jan Burke shot to the top of the *EQMM* Readers Award list this year with "Unharmed," a four-page story with a stunning twist in the tail. Everything about the California author's career has been swift and sure. She broke into print in 1993 with *Goodnight, Irene,* a novel that beat all the odds by being accepted by the first publisher to which it was sent (Simon & Schuster), without the aid of an agent. The book kicked off a series featuring newspaperwoman Irene Kelly, whose adventures are now chronicled in two more books from Simon & Schuster, *Sweet Dreams, Irene* and *Dear Irene* (February 1995).

Jan Burke came to fiction writing after graduating from California State University at Long Beach and spending a number of years managing a manufacturing plant. She has no experience in the newspaper business, on which her books center, but she is an adept researcher, a carry-over from her graduate work in history and a brief stint as a researcher for the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Although she has written only a few short stories to date, the author tells us she enjoys the form for the opportunity it provides "to explore new points of view and formats, settings, times, and characters." Eventually she hopes to introduce her series character, Irene Kelly, to short story readers, but only after she's completed a short story series she is currently working on set in the Middle Ages.

Born in Houston, Texas, and raised in Southern California, in her adult life Jan Burke has chosen to reside in California's coastal cities. She currently makes her home in Seal Beach and writes full-time. Our congratulations to an author who seems likely soon to be one of mystery's leading ladies. She already claims the distinction of being the first woman to place first in the *EQMM* Readers Award Competition.

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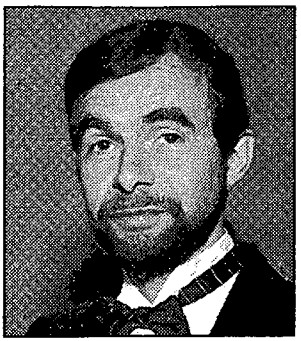

Photo by Standard Studios

Second and third place this year go to someone we're getting used to seeing on these pages, Michigan author Doug Allyn. Mr. Allyn earned his first scroll from *EQMM* readers in 1989 for the story "Star Pupil." Since then, he has finished up twice in first place (1992 & 1993) and once in third (1992). This year the second most popular story with voters in the competition was the heart-pounding adventure novelette "Black Water," which Mr. Allyn has already expanded into a full-length novel to be published by St. Martin's Press in March of 1996.

"Black Water" is a continuation of a series begun in *EQMM* in 1992 with the story "Icewater Mansions," but readers who have been with us since then will have noticed that the author changed the male protagonist of "Icewater Mansions" to a woman before reintroducing her to us in "Black Water." "The Cross-Wolf," your choice for third place this year, develops yet another dimension of the series' heroine Mitch Mitchell: her job as mother to a growing and rebellious boy. Mitch Mitchell is Doug Allyn's second series character. His debut novel, *Motown Underground,* featured a Detroit police detective who made a return appearance in the novel *The Cheerio Killings.*

In between deadlines on his novels, the author still manages to write a number of short stories each year, selling five to *EQMM* in 1994. As you'll notice from the list of runners-up below, another of those five stories, "Wrecker," placed in the year's top ten. If you find it amazing that one author should have produced so many of the year's top stories, you'll be interested to know that he did it while also pursuing a full-time career as a rock musician.

Other Finalists in the Competition

Fourth: "The Theft of Twenty-Nine Minutes" by Edward D. Hoch
Fifth: "Fox in the Briars" by Kate Wilhelm
Sixth: "Wrecker" by Doug Allyn
Seventh: "Me and Mr. Harry" by Batya Swift Yasgur
Eighth: (tied) "The Necessary Brother" by Brendan DuBois
"The Alexandrian Cat" by Steven Saylor
Ninth: "The Problem of the Missing Roadhouse" by Edward D. Hoch
Tenth: "The Corpse in the Attic" by Gunnar Staalesen

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

Donald Olson loves to travel; but when he's prevented from doing so by the demands of his work, he has the luxury at least of inventing the perfect holiday venue—and perhaps the perfect crime . . .

A VOICE FROM THE SEA

by DONALD OLSON

It was early one morning during the second week of their holiday at Margate-on-the-Sound that Ann Myregard found the bottle. They were staying at a resort called Bayberry Landing, recommended by a friend of Ann's who owned a place a few miles up the coast. While her husband Julian was still asleep, Ann had got in the habit of taking long walks along the shore; she liked it best at that hour of the day when the sky was no more than a milky radiance, the beach still deserted, and the sea itself a seemingly boundless gray desert.

She had stopped to pick up a shell when she noticed the bottle bobbing in a shallow tidewater pool. She might have ignored it with a frown of distaste had she not spotted something inside the bottle, a clear glass bottle with a vodka label. She picked it up.

Dislodging the crumbly remnant of a cork, she fished out a sodden sheet of notepaper. Although the printed letterhead, *Sea Inn,* was clearly legible, the blurred handwriting was indecipherable except for one line: *My husband is going to kill me. Hel—*

As Ann might have expected, Julian scoffed at her concern. "A hoax, darling, you must know that. My brother and I used to pull the same trick when we stayed with Uncle Bill at Sunset Bay. Stuck

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notes in bottles. 'Lost at sea, call the Coast Guard,' dumb stuff like that. Why on earth did you lug it home?"

"How do you know it's a hoax? You sound like one of those people who hear a scream in the night and assume it's only someone having fun."

"A scream in the night's one thing. A note in a bottle is another. You surprise me."

"You don't think we should show it to the police?"

"Are you serious? They'd laugh their heads off."

Julian was an architectural engineer with an important city firm. Ann had always admired the cool logic of his thought processes and could not deny that she herself was too often the victim of her own overheated imagination.

"But why would anyone write a message like that on notepaper that could be traced? Ever heard of the Sea Inn?"

"No. It could be anywhere up or down the coast. Use your noodle, darling. Why would anyone staying at an inn write a message like that—if it *were* genuine—and throw it in the sea? She'd go to the cops."

"What if she couldn't? What if she was on a boat and knew her husband meant to kill her? She scribbles that note, sticks it in a bottle, and throws it overboard or out a porthole. Maybe she—"

"Darling, be real. Stuff like that happens in films. It's a childish prank. Why must you always be so gullible?"

True enough, Ann always fell for the hard-luck story, the pleas of panhandlers, the phony charity appeals. She had to admit that Julian was probably right this time as well.

Why then did it continue to bother her, while they played tennis, while they swam in the pool, while she tried to read on the terrace overlooking the beach? She found herself unable to dismiss from her mind the scenario her imagination had created. The note in the bottle was like a voice from the sea, a pitiful cry for help. She tried to guess the rest of the note. *My husband is going to kill me. Help me. Call the police.* . . . Surely something like that, and the woman must have signed it. Whatever the words, if the note was genuine, the futility of its appeal touched Ann's heart.

Upheld by all the comfortable trappings of middle-class success, the Myregards' was seemingly not an unhappy marriage, and yet there were times when Ann resented Julian's air of superior, amused condescension whenever she tried to take a stand on some issue with which he did not agree. Why must he always be proved

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right, and on those rare occasions when he was not, why must he withdraw into a childish sulk?

At breakfast next morning Ann insisted they go to the police. "Who knows, they might have a missing person on their records. This could be a clue."

"Nonsense. We're here to have fun. Why spoil our holiday by making fools of ourselves?"

"If you won't go with me, I'll go by myself."

His handsome face assumed an expression of patient exasperation. "Very well, have it your way. I'll go with you."

"Just to prove I'm wrong?"

"Exactly."

As might have been predicted, the police chief's opinion agreed with Julian's.

"What else can I tell you, Mrs. Myregard? We haven't any missing persons on our books. It's forensically impossible to decipher the rest of the message, and I've never heard of the Sea Inn. Let me tell you something. A few years ago we had something like this happen, not one but several notes in bottles. Turned out there was a party on a yacht. Guests were playing a game. Wrote their names and phone numbers on notes and tossed 'em overboard, with the words, 'Call me. Urgent.' Whoever got called was to be the winner. I'm sorry, there simply isn't anything here to warrant an investigation."

Unsatisfied, Ann consulted the shelf of phone directories at the public library, without telling Julian, but found no listing of a Sea Inn. An apparent dead end, with no way of proving Julian wrong, yet every morning as she strolled along the shore she fancied she could hear a woman's voice imploring her to continue the search.

A vein of guilt underlay Ann's conscious thoughts about the mystery, for if she wanted so badly to prove herself right and Julian wrong then it followed she must want the note to be genuine, and to wish that was tantamount to hoping a murder had been committed, which was absurd. To salve her conscience, she tried to tell herself that the note might be genuine but no murder actually committed. Didn't a number of husbands threaten to kill their spouses in the heat of argument—hadn't Julian himself done so only last month?—without really meaning they'd ever do it?

On Monday a note arrived from Ann's old school friend Rebecca Donahue, the one who had recommended Margate-on-the-Sound, inviting Ann to come up to Tom's Point for lunch on Wednesday.

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There was a P.S. *Bring Julian along, too, if he can bear hours of girl talk.*

"Since I'm clearly an afterthought," said Julian stiffly, "you'd better go alone."

"I'm sure she didn't mean it like that."

"I'm sure she did, knowing Rebecca."

"Well, you never did like her," said Ann. Nor any of her other friends, whom he considered intellectually and socially inferior to his own. Ann felt that he resented Rebecca's success as a fashion designer; at least *she* had proved him wrong.

Tom's Point lived up to Rebecca's enthusiastic description: Commercial development had been strictly limited and it was becoming a popular summer retreat of the well-to-do. Rebecca's beach house at the town end of the Point was a charming amalgam of cedar shingles, native stone, and expanses of glass.

After the obligatory hugs and kisses and exchange of compliments, Rebecca showed Ann around the property. "I've had it only two years, but I'm seriously thinking of living here year-round. The train service isn't bad and I no longer have to worry about time clocks."

"You've done very well," Ann said.

"We both have."

"I still envy your independence."

"Which carries a price tag."

"As does marriage."

"So how *is* Julian? Still telling the world how it ought to be run?"

Ann laughed. "And wondering why it refuses to listen."

"But you're not unhappy."

"Most of the time, no, but just between you and me, this past year has been something of a rocky patch. I've even half-suspected Julian of having someone on the side. But things are okay now. Not even a murmur of protest when I suggested we come up here for our holiday."

Rebecca checked the time. "We're lunching at a place by the marina. Divine seafood. I made reservations for one-thirty so we'd better be off."

They walked to the restaurant, called simply The Wharf, and were given a table on the deck overlooking a forest of masts in the marina.

"So what have you been doing?" asked Rebecca over drinks. "Julian doesn't fish or anything, does he?"

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"No, marine pleasures are not for him. That's why I was surprised when he made no fuss at all about coming up here. The beach scene never appealed to him. And he doesn't at all approve of what *I've* been doing."

Rebecca grinned. "Oh? I can't quite see you hitting on the lifeguards."

"I just might if I thought Julian would even notice. Actually, I've been sleuthing."

She told Rebecca all about the note in the bottle and tried to explain the peculiar sense of obligation its discovery had seemed to impose upon her. Although her friend didn't scoff, neither did she offer encouragement.

"Even if the note were genuine, and I'm afraid I must this once agree with Mr. Know-it-all, there's nothing you could do about it."

"True, but at least I didn't laugh it off. And even if the message was bogus, the notepaper wasn't. It had this Sea Inn letterhead, so there must be such a place. If only I could have discovered where it is . . . Why are you grinning? You think I'm a nut, don't you?"

"No! I'm smiling because it's most extraordinary you should be telling me this here of all places."

"What do you mean?"

"Look down there. Those boats. Would you believe one of them is called the *Sea Inn?*"

Ann nearly gasped. "You're kidding."

"I'm not. Occasionally I go sailing with a friend who has his boat moored down there. I always notice names on boats, some of them are so painfully cute. One of the small yachts is called the *Sea Inn.* My dear, you do look silly with your mouth hanging open like that."

"But why didn't I *think* of that? That it could be a boat?"

"Good question. Where but from a boat would a bottle likely be tossed? That doesn't mean it wasn't a prank."

"Now you sound like Julian. Rebecca, you must show me that boat."

"Gladly. But not till we've had dessert."

"You've no idea who owns it?"

"No, but the guy at the marina office could tell you. So what do you plan to do if you learn the owner's name? Beat a path to his door and say, 'Hey, fella, did you by any chance bump off your wife?' "

Ann plunged her fork into what appeared to be peach cobbler with a fancy name. "I'll think of something."

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"Sweetie, take my advice. Drop it. Use your imagination and help me out instead. I've got hooked into serving on a local committee trying to think of some ideas for a benefit for the Shore Acres Bird Sanctuary."

"Is that a tactful way of saying you think my theory is for the birds?"

A close look at the *Sea Inn* added an immediate sense of reality to Ann's vision of what might have happened. It was, as Rebecca had said, a small yacht. It had cabins, it had portholes, it was almost precisely the sort of craft Ann had visualized. She began to wonder if her interest had been inspired by some sort of psychic awareness, although she'd never thought of herself as possessing such powers. Julian would howl at that notion.

The person in charge of the marina office quickly and incuriously identified the boat's owner as a Gerald Nevis and provided the man's address, which Rebecca told Ann was at the end of the Point. *"The* most tony area. Where the *old* money resides. I don't think you'd be wise to go out there."

"It won't hurt to take a look at the house."

"That's all you'll do? Promise?"

"Promise."

"Want me to go with you?"

"No, I'll just take a peek and then drive back to Margate. Julian will be expecting me for dinner."

A tree-lined avenue led out to the Point, at the end of which an open gate between tall hedges of rhododendron revealed a gabled stone house bright with window boxes full of red geraniums. A mailbox beside the gate bore the name Nevis, and a discreet sign read Serenity Lodge.

Ann was half-inclined to turn the car around and retreat; it was all rather daunting, not at all the sort of place she'd expected. But wouldn't it be cowardly to back off now? She sat in the car struggling to invent some plausible excuse for intruding.

The house itself and something Rebecca had said gave her an idea; plausible or not, she could think of no other. She took a look at herself in the mirror, then drove through the gates, parked in front of a double garage, and walked up to the heavy oak door. She rang the bell.

The man who opened the door looked about thirty-five, attractively featured, dark-haired, with an air of lazy good humor evident in his inquiring smile.

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"Mr. Nevis?"

"That's me."

"My name is Ann Myregard. I should have phoned first but as I was in the neighborhood I thought I'd take a chance and see if I could speak to your wife for a few minutes."

Nevis's bland smile betrayed no sign of uneasiness. "I'm afraid my wife isn't here. What was it about? Maybe I can help. Come in."

He led Ann through the hall into a small sitting room with windows overlooking a rose garden, a warmly agreeable room as disarming as Nevis himself.

Ann explained that she was staying with a friend down the Point, helping her plan a fund-raiser for the local bird sanctuary. "One of the ideas we're considering is a house and garden tour. If there's enough interest, that is. Someone mentioned your lovely house and I thought I might sound your wife out on the chance she might allow us to include it in the tour. It's all very tentative at the moment, of course."

Nevis indicated the loveseat; Ann feigned not to notice, chose a chair instead. He said: "Sounds like a good idea, Mrs. . . . It *is* Mrs. Myregard?"

"It is."

"I was afraid so. May I offer you a drink?"

She was right, he was the most obvious type of flirt. That she could handle, but was he a wife-killer? "No, thank you. I'm sorry I missed your wife. Will she be away long?"

"Not long enough, I dare say. You can leave your number with me. She can get in touch if she's keen on the idea. Or I can."

Ann could see no harm in leaving Rebecca's number. Rebecca could simply say they'd dropped the house tour idea. Ann asked if Nevis had lived there a long time.

"Rather, yes. It was in the family."

"Your wife must be very proud of it."

"Maybe not so proud she'd like a bunch of gawkers trooping through it. She doesn't mingle a lot. Care to see the rest of the house? The view from upstairs is spectacular."

I'll bet it is, thought Ann. For all his good looks and apparent breeding the man certainly lacked finesse, and was clearly being evasive about his wife.

"Did someone tell me you had a yacht at the marina?"

"Why? Are you thinking of a boat tour as well?"

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Ann laughed. "That wouldn't be too practical." She could think of nothing more to add without arousing Nevis's suspicions. For all her cleverness she was forced to admit she'd learned nothing of consequence. The next step, if she were to take one, would be to make local inquiries about Mrs. Gerald Nevis. It should be easy to discover if a Mrs. Nevis actually existed, no matter how infrequently she mingled.

Ann rose. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Nevis. Would you be kind enough to ask your wife to call me? I'll jot down the number."

"No problem. But don't be surprised if you don't hear from her."

Ann was at the door when she heard voices in the hall. Nevis winked at Ann, called out, "In here, darling."

The woman came into the room smiling, but lost the smile the moment her eyes discovered Ann. With her plain but arresting features she reminded Ann of pictures of some literary figure from the distant past. Virginia Woolf, was it, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning? Her face seemed somehow as out of fashion as her clothes.

Nevis made introductions in an offhand way and launched into a hasty explanation of Ann's presence. Now that his wife had arrived he seemed instantly to lose interest. "Pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Myregard. I'm off, darling. See you at dinner."

Ann, who had never felt more foolish or more like a fraud, found herself babbling another apology and stressing the uncertainty of the house tour idea.

Mrs. Nevis's intelligent gray eyes seemed oblivious of Ann's confusion. "Oh, but it's a splendid idea. I do wish I could say yes, but unfortunately it wouldn't be possible for us right now, things being as they are."

Marital troubles? "I quite understand," Ann said.

As she was saying goodbye the door opened and a boy of about ten wandered in, a pint-sized image of his father but with his mother's large, expressive eyes.

"This is William," said Mrs. Nevis. "We've just come from a delightful sail with a friend."

"How nice," said Ann, beaming at the lad. "And your father told me you have your own boat. What fun."

"It's a yacht," said William gravely. "It's called the *Sea Inn.*"

A thought occurred to Ann, remembering something Julian had said. "We had a boat once. It was called the *Tally-Ho.* My brother and I used to do some rather naughty things when we were out on

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the lake. Like stuffing notes in bottles and tossing them overboard. I'll bet *you* never did anything like that."

William grinned. "Sure I did. Me and Bunny Wilkinson."

Mrs. Nevis gave him a sidelong look of teasing reproach. "I learn something new every day."

Showing Ann out, Mrs. Nevis paused. "I really wish I could have said yes to your idea. Come into the other room, I'll show you why I can't."

She led Ann across a long, narrow living room to French windows overlooking the triangular tip of the Point. Ann looked across the broad lawn to where an elderly man sat huddled in a wheelchair, his shoulders draped in a shawl.

"Gerald's father," said Mrs. Nevis. "He's had a series of strokes. He's paralyzed and can't talk. The doctors have told us he can't live much longer. So you can see . . ."

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course. I'm so sorry."

"Poor old fellow's never been quite the same since the accident. Almost ten years ago. He'd remarried after being a widower for many years. A younger woman. Not at all suitable. She and Mr. Nevis were on a cruise up the coast when a storm came up. She was swept overboard. It was all very tragic. The body was never recovered. Ironical, in a way. Without Helen's money, Mr. Nevis would never have been able to hang on to this place."

Ann thought of the note in the bottle. *My husband is going to kill me. Hel—*

"Helen. That was her name? The woman who drowned?"

"Yes. As I said, the marriage was a mistake. My father-in-law had come to accept that, but I don't think he's ever stopped feeling guilty about her death."

Ann drove away wondering why she had taken it for granted the bottle had been cast in the sea within a recent period, a totally illogical conclusion when one thought of Spanish coins washed up on beaches after centuries of lying trapped beneath the sea.

Much to her own surprise, for all the way home she had been gleefully anticipating Julian's reaction to her discovery, she suddenly decided to keep the secret to herself when she came face-to-face with him. He'd been so sweet lately, more like his old self; why puncture his ego by boasting of what she'd learned?

She found him slumped in a chair holding the fateful bottle in his hands, as if while Ann was gone he'd been pondering the mystery of its fascination for her.

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"So what was it like," he asked, "your friend's house?"

"Lovely. And you'll be pleased to learn Rebecca agrees with you about my sleuthing. I've dismissed the case for lack of evidence. You're probably right. It was only a hoax."

"Good girl. If you must get involved, let it be in something serious."

"So what do you want to do now?" she asked.

"Something we haven't done yet. Rent a boat and go for a sail."

That he should suggest such an idea astonished her. "A *sail?* Now?"

"Why not?"

"But, darling, you don't know the first thing about sailing. Neither do I."

"That's what you think. I did quite a lot of sailing in my younger days."

Ann moved to the window and looked at the clouds scudding across the sky, the whitecaps on the water.

"It's hardly a good day for sailing."

He came up behind her, encircled her body with his arms, brushed his lips against her ear. This, too, astonished Ann; gestures of affection had become so rare.

"Let's risk it," he whispered.

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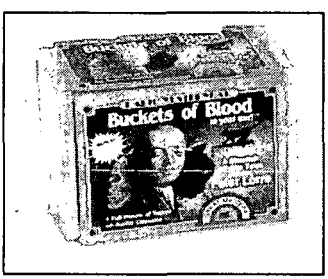

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The author of nearly two dozen novels in the fantasy genre, Peter Tremayne only recently began the series of crime stories set in medieval Ireland to which the following tale belongs. That he should choose this setting for his stories will probably not be surprising to you once you know that Peter Tremayne is the pseudonym for the respected Celtic scholar Peter Berresford Ellis. . . .

A CANTICLE FOR WULFSTAN

by PETER TREMAYNE

Abbot Laisran smiled broadly. He was a short, rotund, red-faced man. His face proclaimed a permanent state of jollity, for he had been born with that rare gift of humour and a sense that the world was there to provide enjoyment to those who inhabited it. When he smiled, it was no fainthearted parting of the lips but an expression that welled from the depths of his being, bright and all-encompassing. And when he laughed it was as though the whole earth trembled in accompaniment.

"It is so good to see you again, Sister Fidelma," Laisran boomed, and his voice implied it was no mere formula but a genuine expression of his joy in the meeting.

Sister Fidelma answered his smile with an almost urchin grin, quite at odds with her habit and calling. Indeed, those who examined the young woman closely, observing the rebellious strands of red hair thrusting from beneath her headdress, seeing the bubbling laughter in her green eyes, and the natural expression of merriment on her fresh, attractive face, would wonder why such an alluring young woman had taken up the life of a *religieuse*. Her tall, yet well-proportioned figure seemed to express a desire for a more active and joyous role in life than that in the cloistered confines of a religious community.

"And it is good to see you again, Laisran. It is always a pleasure to come to Durrow."

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Abbot Laisran reached out both his hands to take Fidelma's extended one, for they were old friends. Laisran had known Fidelma since she had reached "the age of choice," and he, it was, who had persuaded her to take up the study of law under the Brehon Morann of Tara. Further, he had persuaded her to continue her studies until she had reached the qualification of *Anruth,* one degree below that of *Ollamh,* the highest rank of learning. It had been Laisran who had advised her to join the community of Brigid at Kildare when she had become accepted as a *dálaigh,* an advocate of the Brehon Court. In the old days, before the Light of Christ reached the shores of Éireann, all those who held professional office were of the caste of Druids. When the Druids gave up their power to the priests and communities of Christ, the professional classes, in turn, enlisted in the new holy orders as they had done in the old.

"Shall you be long among us?" inquired Laisran.

Fidelma shook her head.

"I am on a journey to the shrine of the Blessed Patrick at Ard Macha."

"Well, you must stay and dine with us this night. It is a long time since I have had a stimulating talk."

Fidelma grimaced with humour.

"You are abbot of one of the great teaching monasteries of Ireland. Professors of all manner of subjects reside here with students from the four corners of Ireland. How can you be lacking stimulating discourse?"

Laisran chuckled.

"These professors tend to lecture, there is little dialogue. How boring monologues can be. Sometimes I find more intelligence among our students."

The great monastery on the plain of the oaks, which gave it the name Durrow, was scarcely a century old but already its fame as a university had spread to many peoples of Europe. Students flocked to the scholastic island, in the middle of the bog of Aillín, from numerous lands. The Blessed Colmcille had founded the community at Durrow before he had been exiled by the High King and left the shores of Éireann to form his more famous community on Iona in the land of the Dàl Riada.

Sister Fidelma fell in step beside the abbot as he led the way along the great vaulted corridors of the monastery towards his chamber. Brothers and laymen scurried quietly hither and thither through the corridors, heads bowed, intent on their respective classes or

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devotions. There were four faculties of learning at Durrow: theology, medicine, law, and the liberal arts.

It was midmorning, halfway between the first Angelus bell and the summons of the noonday Angelus. Fidelma had been up before dawn and had travelled fifteen miles to reach Durrow on horseback, the ownership of a horse being a privilege accorded only to her rank as a representative of the Brehon Court.

A solemn-faced monk strode across their path, hesitated and inclined his head. He was a thin, dark-eyed man of swarthy skin who wore a scowl with the same ease that Abbot Laisran wore a smile. Laisran made a curious gesture of acknowledgement with his hand, more as one of dismissal than recognition, and the man moved off into a side room.

"Brother Finan, our professor of law," explained Laisran, almost apologetically. "A good man, but with no sense of humour at all. I often think he missed his vocation and that he was designed in life to be a professional mourner."

He cast a mischievous grin at her.

"Finan of Durrow is well respected among the Brehons," replied Fidelma, trying to keep her face solemn. It was hard to keep a straight face in the company of Laisran.

"Ah," sighed Laisran, "it would lighten our world if you came to teach here, Fidelma. Finan teaches the letter of the law, whereas you would explain to our pupils that often the law can be for the guidance of the wise and the obedience of fools, that justice can sometimes transcend law."

Sister Fidelma bit her lip.

"There is sometimes a moral question which has to be resolved above the law," she agreed. "Indeed, I have had to face decisions between law and justice."

"Exactly so. Finan's students leave here with a good knowledge of the law but often little knowledge of justice. Perhaps you will think on this?"

Sister Fidelma hesitated.

"Perhaps," she said guardedly.

Laisran smiled and nodded.

"Look around you, Fidelma. Our fame as a centre of learning is even known in Rome. Do you know, no fewer than eighteen languages are spoken among our students? We resort to Latin and sometimes Greek as our lingua franca. Among the students that we have here are not just the children of the Gael. We have a young

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Frankish prince, Dagobert, and his entourage. There are Saxon princes, Wulfstan, Eadred, and Raedwald. Indeed, we have a score of Saxons. There is Talorgen, a prince of Rheged in the land of Britain . . ."

"I hear that the Saxons are making war on Rheged and attempting to destroy it so they can expand their borders," observed Fidelma. "That cannot make for easy relationships among the students."

"Ah, that is so. Our Irish monks in Northumbria attempt to teach these Saxons the ways of Christ, and of learning and piety, but they remain a fierce warrior race intent on conquest, plunder, and land. Rheged may well fall like the other kingdoms of the Britons before them. Elmet fell when I was a child. Where the Britons of Elmet once dwelt, now there are Saxon farmers and Saxon thanes."

They halted before Laisran's chamber door. The bishop opened it to usher Fidelma inside.

Fidelma frowned. "There has been perpetual warfare between the Britons and the Saxons for the last two and a half centuries. Surely it is hard to contain both Briton and Saxon within the same hall of learning?"

They moved into Laisran's official chamber, which he used for administrating the affairs of the great monastery. He motioned Fidelma to be seated before a smouldering turf fire and went to pour wine from an earthenware jug on the table, handing a goblet to her and raising the other in salute.

"Agimus tibi gratias, Omnipotens Deus," he intoned solemnly but with a sparkle of humour in his eyes.

"Amen," echoed Sister Fidelma, raising the goblet to her lips and tasting the rich red wine of Gaul.

Abbot Laisran settled himself in a chair and stretched out his feet towards the fire.

"Difficult to contain Briton and Saxon?" he mused, after a while. In fact, Sister Fidelma had almost forgotten that she had asked the question. "Yes. We have had several fights among the Britons and the Saxons here. Only the prohibition of weapons on our sacred ground has so far prevented injury."

"Why don't you send one group or the other to another centre of learning?"

Laisran sniffed.

"That has already been suggested by Finan, no less. A neat, practical, and logical suggestion. The question is . . . which group? Both

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Britons and Saxons refuse to go, each group demanding that if anyone leave Durrow then it should be the other."

"Then you have difficulties," observed Fidelma.

"Yes. Each is quick to anger and slow to forget an insult, real or imaginary. One Saxon princeling, Wulfstan, is very arrogant. He has ten in his retinue. He comes from the land of the South Saxons, one of the smaller Saxon kingdoms, but to hear him speak you would think that his kingdom encompassed the world. The sin of pride greatly afflicts him. After his first clash with the Britons he demanded that he be given a chamber whose window was barred from ingress and whose door could be bolted from the inside."

"A curious request in a house of God," agreed Sister Fidelma.

"That is what I told him. But he told me that he feared for his life. In fact, so apprehensive was his manner, so genuine did his fear appear, that I decided to appease his anxiety and provide him with such a chamber. I gave him a room with a barred window in which we used to keep transgressors but had our carpenter fix the lock so that the door could be barred from the inside. Wulfstan is a strange young man. He never moves without a guard of five of his retinue. And after Vespers he retires to his room but has his retinue search it before he enters and only then will he enter alone and bar the door. There he remains until the morning Angelus."

Sister Fidelma pursed her lips and shook her head in wonder.

"Truly one would think him greatly oppressed and frightened. Have you spoken to the Britons?"

"I have, indeed. Talorgen, for example, openly admits that all Saxons are enemies of his blood but that he would not deign to spill Saxon blood in a house of God. In fact, the young Briton rebuked me, saying that his people had been Christian for centuries and had made no war on sacred ground, unlike the Saxons. He reminded me that within the memory of living man, scarcely half a century ago, the Saxon warriors of Aethelfrith of Northumbria had defeated Selyf map Cynan of Powys in battle at a place called Caer Legion, but then profaned their victory by slaughtering a thousand British monks from Bangor-is-Coed. He averred that the Saxons were scarcely Christian in thought and barely so in word and deed."

"In other words . . . ?" prompted Fidelma when Laisran paused to sip his wine.

"In other words, Talorgen would not harm a Saxon protected by the sacred soil of a Christian house, but he left no doubt that he would not hesitate to slay Wulfstan outside these walls."

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"So much for Christian charity, love, and forgiveness," sighed Fidelma.

Laisran grimaced. "One must remember that the Britons have suffered greatly at the hands of the Saxons during these last centuries. After all, the Saxons have invaded and conquered much of their land. Ireland has received great communities of refugees fleeing from the Saxon conquests in Britain."

Fidelma smiled whimsically. "Do I detect that you approve of Talorgen's attitude?"

Laisran grinned.

"If you ask me as a Christian, no; no, of course not. If you ask me as a member of a race who once shared a common origin, belief, and law with our cousins, the Britons, then I must say to you that I have a sneaking sympathy for Talorgen's anger."

There came a sudden banging at the door of the chamber, so loud and abrupt that both Laisran and Fidelma started in surprise. Before the abbot had time to call out, the door burst open and a middle-aged monk, his face red, his clothes awry from running, burst breathlessly into the room.

He halted a few paces inside the door, his shoulders heaving, his breath panting from exertion.

Laisran rose, his brows drawing together in an unnatural expression of annoyance.

"What does this mean, Brother Ultan? Have you lost your senses?"

The man shook his head, eyes wide. He gulped air, trying to recover his breath.

"God between us and all evil," he got out at last. "There has been a murder committed."

Laisran's composure was severely shaken.

"Murder, you say?"

"Wulfstan, the Saxon, your Grace! He has been stabbed to death in his chamber."

The blood drained from Laisran's face and he cast a startled glance towards Sister Fidelma. Then he turned back to Brother Ultan, his face now set in stern lines.

"Compose yourself, Brother," he said kindly, "and tell me slowly and carefully. What has occurred?"

Brother Ultan swallowed nervously and sought to collect his thoughts.

"Eadred, the companion of Wulfstan, came to me during the mid-morning hour. He was troubled. Wulfstan had not attended the

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morning prayers nor had he been at his classes. No one has seen him since he retired into his chamber following Vespers last night. Eadred had gone to his chamber and found the door closed. There was no response to his summons at the door. So, as I am master of the household, he came to see me. I accompanied him to Wulfstan's chamber. Sure enough, the door was closed and clearly barred on the inside."

He paused a moment and then continued.

"Having knocked awhile, I then, with Eadred's help, forced the door. It took awhile to do, and I had to summon the aid of two other Brothers to eventually smash the wooden bars that secured it. Inside the chamber. . ." He bit his lip, his face white with the memory.

"Go on," ordered Laisran.

"Inside the chamber was the body of Wulfstan. He lay back on the bed. He was in his night attire, which was stained red with congealed blood. There were many wounds in his chest and stomach. He had been stabbed several times. It was clear that he had been slain."

"What then?"

Brother Ultan was now more firmly in control. He contrived to shrug at Laisran's question.

"I left the two Brothers to guard the chamber. I told Eadred to return to his room and not to tell anyone until I sent for him. Then I came immediately to inform you, your Grace."

"Wulfstan killed?" Laisran whispered as he considered the implications. "Then God protect us, indeed. The land of the South Saxons may be a small kingdom, but these Saxons band together against all foreigners. This could lead to some incident between the Saxons and the land of Éireann."

Sister Fidelma came forward from her seat, frowning at the master of the household.

"Let me get this clear, Brother Ultan, did you say that the chamber door was locked from the inside?"

Brother Ultan examined her with a frown of annoyance, turning back to Abbot Laisran as though to ignore her.

"Sister Fidelma is a *dálaigh* of the Brehon Court, Brother," Laisran rebuked softly.

The Brother's eyes widened and he turned hurriedly back to Sister Fidelma with a look of respect.

"Yes, the door of Wulfstan's chamber was barred from the inside."

"And the window was barred?"

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A look of understanding crossed Ultan's face.

"No one could have entered or left the chamber through the window, Sister," he said slowly, swallowing hard, as the thought crystallised in his mind.

"And yet no one could have left by the door?" pressed Sister Fidelma remorselessly.

Ultan shook his head.

"Are you sure that the wounds of Wulfstan were not self-inflicted?"

"No!" whispered Ultan, swiftly genuflecting.

"Then how could someone have entered his chamber, slaughtered him, and left it, ensuring that the door was bolted from the inside?"

"God help us, Sister!" cried Ultan. "Whoever did this deed was a sorcerer! An evil demon able to move through walls of stone!"

Abbot Laisran halted uneasily at the end of the corridor in which two of his brethren stood to bar the way against any inquisitive members of the brethren or students. Already, in spite of Brother Ultan's attempt to stop the spread of the news, word of Wulfstan's death was being whispered among the cloisters. Laisran turned to Sister Fidelma, who had followed at his heels, calm and composed, her hands now folded demurely in the folds of her gown.

"Are you sure that you wish to undertake this task, Sister?"

Sister Fidelma wrinkled her nose.

"Am I not an advocate of the Brehon Court? Who else should conduct this investigation if not I, Laisran?"

"But the manner of his death . . ."

She grimaced and cut him short.

"I have seen many bodies and only few have died peacefully. This is the task that I was trained for."

Laisran sighed and motioned the two brothers to stand aside.

"This is Sister Fidelma, a *dálaigh* of the Brehon Court who is investigating the death of Wulfstan on my behalf. Make sure that she has every assistance."

Laisran hesitated, raised his shoulder almost in a gesture of bewilderment, then turned and left.

The two Brothers stood aside respectfully as Sister Fidelma hesitated at the door.

The chamber of Wulfstan was one which led off a corridor of dark granite stone on the ground floor of the monastery. The door, which now hung splintered on its hinges, was thick—perhaps about two

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inches thick—and had been attached to the door frame with heavy iron hinges. Unlike most doors she was accustomed to, there was no iron handle on the outside. She paused awhile, her keen green eyes searching the timber of the door which showed the scuffing of Ultan's attempts to force it.

Then she took a step forward but stayed at the threshold, letting her keen eyes travel over the room beyond.

Beyond was a bed, a body laid sprawled on its back, arms flung out, head with wild staring eyes directed towards the ceiling in a last painful gape preceding death. The body was clad in a white shirt which was splattered with blood. The wounds were certainly not self-inflicted.

From her position, she saw a small wooden chair, on which was flung a pile of clothes. There was also a small table with an oil lamp and some writing materials on it. There was little else in the room.

The light entered the gloomy chamber from a small window which stood at a height of eight feet from the floor and was crisscrossed with iron bars through which one might thrust an arm to shoulder length, but certainly no more than that could pass beyond. All four walls of the chamber were of stone blocks, while the floor as well was flagged in great granite slabs. The ceiling of the room was of dark oak beams. There was little light to observe detail in the chamber, even though it was approaching the noonday. The only light that entered was from the tiny, barred window.

"Bring me a strong lamp, Brothers," Fidelma called to the two monks in the corridor.

"There is a lamp already in the room, Sister," replied one of them.

Sister Fidelma hid her annoyance.

"I want nothing in this room touched until I have examined it carefully. Now fetch me the lamp."

She waited, without moving, until one of the Brothers hurried away and returned with an oil lamp.

"Light it," instructed Fidelma.

The monk did so.

Fidelma took it from his hand with a nod of thanks.

"Wait outside and let no one into the room until I say so."

Holding the lamp, she stepped forward into the curious chamber of death.

Wulfstan's throat had been slashed with a knife or sword and there were several great stab wounds in his chest around the heart.

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His night attire was torn by the weapon and bloodied, as were the sheets around him.

On the floor beside the bed was a piece of fine cloth which was bloodstained. The blood had dried. She picked it up and examined it. It was an elegantly woven piece of linen which was embroidered. It carried a Latin motto. She examined the bloodstains on it. It appeared as if whoever had killed Wulfstan had taken the kerchief from his pocket and wiped his weapon clean, letting the kerchief drop to the floor beside the body in a fit of absent-mindedness. Sister Fidelma placed the kerchief in the pocket within the folds of her robe.

She examined the window next. Although it was too high to reach up to it, the bars seemed secure enough. Then she gazed up at the heavy wooden planking and beams which formed the ceiling. It was a high chamber, some eleven feet from floor to ceiling. The floor, too, seemed solid enough.

Near the bed she suddenly noticed a pile of ashes. She dropped to one knee beside the ashes and examined them, trying not to disperse them with her breath, for they appeared to be the remnants of some piece of paper, or vellum, perhaps. Not a very big piece either, but it was burnt beyond recognition.

She rose and examined the door next.

There were two wooden bars which had secured it. Each bar, when in place, slotted into iron rests. The first was at a height of three feet from the bottom of the door while the second was five feet from the bottom. She saw that one of the iron rests had been splintered from the wooden doorjamb, obviously when Ultan had broken in. The pressure against the bar had wrenched the rest from its fastenings. But the bottom set of rests were in place and there was no sign of damage to the second bar, which was lying just behind the door. Both bars were solid enough. The ends were wrapped with twine, she presumed to stop the wood wearing against the iron rests in which they lodged. On one of the bars the pieces of twine had become unwound, blackened, and frayed at the end.

Sister Fidelma gave a deep sigh.

Here, indeed, was a problem to be solved, unless the owner of the kerchief could supply an answer.

She moved to the door and suddenly found herself slipping. She reached out a hand to steady herself. There was a small pool of blackened grease just inside the door. Her sharp eyes caught sight of a similar pool on the other side of the door. Bending to examine

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them, she frowned as she noticed two nails attached on the door frame, either side of the door. A short length of twine, blackened and frayed at the end, was attached to each nail.

Sister Fidelma compressed her lips thoughtfully and stood staring at the door for a long while before turning to leave the death chamber.

In Abbot Laisran's chamber, Sister Fidelma seated herself at the long table. She had arranged with the abbot to interview any she felt able to help her in arriving at a solution to the problem. Laisran himself offered to sit in on her encounters but she had felt it unnecessary. Laisran had taken himself to a side room, having presented her with a bell to summon him if she needed any help.

Brother Ultan was recruited to fetch those whom she wanted to see and was straightaway dispatched to bring Wulfstan's fellow Saxon prince, Eadred, who had helped Ultan discover the body, as well as his cousin Raedwald.

Eadred was a haughty youth with flaxen hair and cold blue eyes that seemed to have little expression. His features seemed fixed with a mixture of disdain and boredom. He entered the chamber, eyes narrowing as he beheld Sister Fidelma. A tall, muscular young man in his late twenties accompanied Eadred. Although he carried no arms, he acted as if he were the prince's bodyguard.

"Are you Eadred?" Fidelma asked the youth.

The young man scowled.

"I do not answer questions from a woman." His voice was harsh, and that combined with his guttural accent made his stilted Irish sound raucous.

Sister Fidelma sighed. She had heard that Saxons could be arrogant and that they treated their womenfolk more as chattels than as human beings.

"I am investigating the death of your countryman, Wulfstan. I need my questions to be answered," she replied firmly.

Eadred merely ignored her.

"Lady." It was the tall muscular Saxon who spoke and his knowledge of Irish was better than that of his prince. "I am Raedwald, thane of Staeningum, cousin to the thane of Andredswald. It is not the custom of princes of our race to discourse with women if they be not of equal royal rank."

"Then I am obliged for your courtesy in explaining your customs, Raedwald. Eadred, your cousin, seems to lack a knowledge of the

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law and customs of the country in which he is now a guest."

Ignoring the angry frown on Eadred's features, she reached forward and rang the silver bell on the table before her. The Abbot Laisran entered from a side room.

"As you warned me, your Grace, the Saxons seem to think that they are above the law of this land. Perhaps they will accept the explanation from your lips."

Laisran nodded and turned to the young men. He bluntly told them of Fidelma's rank and position in law, that even the High King had to take note of her wisdom and learning. Eadred continued to scowl but he inclined his head stiffly when Laisran told him that he was under legal obligation to answer Fidelma's questions. Raedwald seemed to accept the explanation as a matter of course.

"As your countryman considers you of royal rank, I will deign to answer your questions," Eadred said, moving forward and seating himself without waiting for Fidelma's permission. Raedwald continued to stand.

Fidelma exchanged a glance with Laisran, who shrugged.

"The customs of the Saxons are not our customs, Sister Fidelma," Laisran said apologetically. "You will ignore their tendency to boorish behaviour."

Eadred flushed angrily.

"I am a prince of the blood royal of the South Saxons, descended through the blood of Aelle from the great god Woden!"

Raedwald, who stood silently with arms folded behind him, looking unhappy, opened his mouth and then closed it firmly.

Abbot Laisran genuflected. Sister Fidelma merely stared at the young man in amusement.

"So you are not yet truly Christian, believing only in the One True God?"

Eadred bit his lip.

"All Saxon royal houses trace their bloodline to Woden, whether god, man, or hero," he responded, with a slightly defensive tone.

"Tell me something of yourself then. I understand that you were cousin to Wulfstan? If you find speaking in our language difficult, you may speak in Latin or Greek. I am fluent in their usage."

"I am not," rasped Eadred. "I speak your language from my study here but I speak no other tongue fluently, though I have some knowledge of Latin."

Sister Fidelma hid her surprise and gestured for him to continue. Most Irish princes and chieftains she knew spoke several languages

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fluently besides their own, especially Latin and some Greek.

"Very well. Wulfstan was your cousin, wasn't he?"

"Wulfstan's father Cissa, king of the South Saxons, was brother to my father, Cymen. I am thane of Andredswald, as my father was before me."

"Tell me how Wulfstan and yourself came to be here, in Durrow."

Eadred sniffed.

"Some years ago, one of your race, a man called Diciul, arrived in our country and began to preach of his god, a god with no name who had a son named Christ. Cissa, the king, was converted to this new god and turned away from Woden. The man of Éireann was allowed to form a community, a monastery, at Bosa's Ham, in our land, and many went to hear him teach. Cissa decided that Wulfstan, who was heir apparent to the kingship, should come to the land of Éireann for education."

Sister Fidelma nodded, wondering whether it was the young man's poor usage of Irish that made him seem so disapproving of Cissa's conversion to Christ.

"Then Wulfstan is the tanist in your land?"

Abbot Laisran intervened with a smile.

"The Saxons have a different system of law from us, Sister Fidelma," he interrupted. "They hold that the eldest son inherits all. There is no election by the *derbhfine* such as we have."

"I see," nodded Fidelma. "Go on, Eadred. Cissa decided to send Wulfstan here."

The young man grimaced sourly.

"I was ordered to accompany him and learn with him. We came together with our cousin Raedwald, thane of Staeningum, and ten churls and five slaves to attend our needs, and here we have been now for six moons."

"And not the best of our students," muttered Laisran.

"That's as may be," snapped Eadred. "We did not ask to come, but were ordered by Cissa. I shall be pleased to depart now and take the body of my kinsman back to my country."

"Does the Latin inscription *cave quid dicis* mean anything to you?"

Eadred sniffed.

"It is the motto of the young Frankish prince, Dagobert."

Sister Fidelma gazed thoughtfully at the young man before turning to Raedwald. The muscular young man's face was flushed and confused.

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"And you, Raedwald? Does it mean anything to you?"

"Alas, I have no Latin, lady," he mumbled.

"So? And when did you last see Wulfstan?"

"Just after Vespers."

"What happened exactly?"

"As usual, Wulfstan was accompanied by myself and Eadred, with two of our churls and two slaves, to his chamber for the night. We searched the chamber as usual and then Wulfstan entered and dismissed us."

Eadred nodded in agreement.

"I talked awhile with Raedwald in the corridor. We both heard Wulfstan secure the wooden bars. Then I went off to my chamber."

Sister Fidelma glanced again towards Raedwald.

"And you can confirm this, Raedwald?"

Eadred flushed.

"You doubt my word?" His voice was brittle.

"This investigation will be conducted under our law, Eadred," retorted Fidelma in annoyance.

Raedwald looked awkward.

"I can confirm what Eadred says, lady," he replied. "The thane of Andredswald speaks the truth. As soon as we heard the bars slide shut we both knew that the prince, Wulfstan, had secured himself in for the night and so we both departed for our sleeping chambers."

Sister Fidelma nodded thoughtfully.

"You can also confirm, Eadred, that Wulfstan was afraid of being attacked? Why was that?"

Eadred sniffed.

"There are too many mad *welisc* in this place and one in particular had made several threats against him . . . that barbarian Talorgen!"

"*Welisc?* Who are they?" frowned Fidelma, puzzled.

Laisran gave a tired smile.

"The Saxons call all Britons *welisc*. It is a name which signifies that they are foreigners."

"I see. So you left Wulfstan safely secured in his room? You did not seem to be as afraid of the Britons as your cousin. Why was that?"

Eadred laughed bitterly.

"I would not be thane of Andredswald if I could not defend myself against a pack of *welisc* cowards. No, I fear no barbarian's whelp nor his sire, either."

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"And the rest of your Saxon entourage? Did they fear the Britons?"

"Whether they feared or not, it is of no significance. I command them and they will do as I tell them."

Sister Fidelma exhaled in exasperation. It would be difficult to live in a Saxon country if one was not a king or a thane, she thought.

"When did you realise that Wulfstan was missing?" she prompted.

"At prayers following the first bell. . . ."

"He means the Angelus," explained Laisran.

"He did not come to prayers and, thinking he had slept late, I went to classes."

"What classes were these?"

"That weasel-faced Finan's class on the conduct of law between kingdoms."

"Go on."

"During the midmorning break, having realised that Wulfstan was missing, I went to his room. The door was shut, signifying he was still inside. I banged upon the door. There was no response. I then went to look for Brother Ultan, the house-churl . . ."

"The steward of our community," corrected Laisran softly.

"We went to Wulfstan's chamber and Ultan had to call upon two other brothers to help us break in the door. Wulfstan had been feloniously slain. One doesn't have to search far for the culprit."

"And who might that be?" invited Sister Fidelma.

"Why, it is obvious. The *welisc*-man, Talorgen, who calls himself a prince of Rheged. He had threatened Wulfstan's life. And it is well known the *welisc* practise sorcery. . . ."

"What do you mean?" Fidelma asked sharply.

"Why, the fact that Wulfstan had been slaughtered in his bedchamber while the window was barred and the door shut and secured from the inside. Who else but a *welisc* would be able to shape-change and perpetrate such a monstrous deed?"

Sister Fidelma hid her cynical smile.

"Eadred, I think you have much to learn, for you seem to be wallowing in the superstition of your old religion."

Eadred sprang up, his hand going to his belt where a knife might be worn.

"I am thane of Andredswald! I consented to be questioned by a mere woman because it is the custom of this land. However, I will not be insulted by one."

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"I am sorry that you think that I insult you," Sister Fidelma replied, with a dangerous glint in her eyes. "You may go."

Eadred's face was working in a rage but Laisran moved forward and opened the door.

The young Saxon prince turned and stormed out. Raedwald hesitated a moment, made a gesture almost of apology, and then followed the prince out of the room.

"Did I not tell you that these Saxons are strange, haughty people, Fidelma?" smiled Laisran almost sadly.

Sister Fidelma shook her head.

"They probably have their good and bad like all peoples. Raedwald seems filled more with the courtesy of princes than his cousin Eadred."

"Well, if Eadred and his followers are to be judged, then we have had their bad. As for Raedwald, although a thane and older than either Wulfstan or Eadred, he seems quiet and was dominated by them both. He is more of a servant than a master. I gather this is because his cousins both stand in closer relationship to their king than he does." Laisran paused and cast her a curious glance. "Why did you ask them about the Latin motto—*cave quid dicis?*"

"It was a motto found on a piece of linen which wiped the weapon that killed Wulfstan. It could have been dropped by the killer or it could have been Wulfstan's."

Laisran shook his head.

"No. Eadred was right. That belligerent motto, Fidelma, 'beware what you say,' is the motto of the Frankish prince—Dagobert. I have recently remarked on its pugnacity to the young man."

Sister Fidelma stretched reflectively. "It seems things do not look good for Dagobert of the Franks. He now stands as the most likely suspect."

"Not necessarily. Anyone could have taken and dropped the cloth, and there are many here who have come to hate the arrogance of the Saxons. Why, I have even heard the dour Finan declare that he would like to drown the lot of them!"

Fidelma raised her eyebrows.

"Are you telling me that we must suspect Finan, the professor of your law faculty?"

Abbot Laisran suddenly laughed.

"Oh, the idea of Finan being able to shape-change to enter a locked room, commit murder, and sneak out without disturbing the locks, is an idea I find amusing but hardly worthy of consideration."

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Sister Fidelma gazed thoughtfully at Laisran.

"Do you believe that this murder could only be carried out by sorcery, then?"

Laisran's rotund face clouded and he genuflected quickly.

"God between me and all evil, Fidelma, but is there any other explanation? We come from a culture which accepted shape-changing as a normal occurrence. Move among our people and they will tell you that Druids still exist and have such capabilities. Wasn't Diarmuid's foster brother changed into a boar, and wasn't Caer, the beloved of Aengus Og, condemned to change her form every alternate year?"

"These are ancient legends, Laisran," admonished Sister Fidelma. "We live in reality, in the here and now. And it is among the people of this community that we will find the person who slew Wulfstan. Before I question Dagobert, however, I would like to see Wulfstan's chamber once more."

Abbot Laisran pulled at his lower lip. His usually jovial face was creased in a frown of perplexity.

"I do not understand, Sister Fidelma. Everyone in our community here, at Durrow, had cause to kill Wulfstan and everyone is suspect. Is that what you are saying? At the same time that everyone is suspect, no one could have done the deed, for its implementation was beyond the hand of any human agency."

"Now that I did not say," Sister Fidelma admonished the abbot firmly, as she led the way along the corridor to halt at the open door of what had been Wulfstan's chamber.

The body of Wulfstan had been removed to the chapel of St. Benignus, where preparations were being made to transport its sarcophagus to the coast, from where Eadred and his entourage would accompany it, by sea, to the land of the South Saxons which lay on the southern shore of Britain.

Sister Fidelma stared once again at the grey stone-flagged floor. She walked over the slabs, pressing each with her foot. Then she stared upwards towards the ceiling, which rose about eleven feet above the chamber floor. Her eyes eventually turned back to the bars on the window.

"Give me a hand," she suddenly demanded.

Abbot Laisran stared at her in surprise as she began pushing the wooden table towards the window.

Hastily, he joined her in the effort, grinning sheepishly.

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"If the young novitiates of my order could see their abbot heaving furniture about . . ." he began.

"They would realise that their abbot was merely human," replied Fidelma, smiling.

They pushed the table under the barred window and, to Abbot Laisran's astonishment, Sister Fidelma suddenly scrambled on top of the table. It rose three feet above the ground and by standing on it, Sister Fidelma, being tall, could reach easily to the bars of the solitary window whose bottom level was eight feet above the floor. She reached up with both her hands and tested each inch-thick iron bar carefully.

The lowering of her shoulders showed her disappointment.

Slowly she clambered down, helped by the arm of Laisran.

Her lips were compressed. "I thought the bars might have been loose."

"It was a good idea," smiled Laisran, encouragingly.

"Come, show me the floor above this," Sister Fidelma said abruptly.

With a sigh, Laisran hastened after her as she strode swiftly away.

The floor above turned out to be equally disappointing. Over Wulfstan's chamber stretched a long wooden floor which was the floor of one of the long dormitories for the novitiates of the community. There were over a dozen beds in the dormitory. Even had she not examined the boards of the floor carefully, to see whether any had been prised up in order that a person could be lowered into the chamber below, and realised that none of the floorboards had been moved in many years, Sister Fidelma would still have recognised the fact that such an exercise would have necessitated the participation of everyone in the dormitory.

She turned away with disappointment on her features.

"Tell me, Laisran, what lies below Wulfstan's chamber?"

Laisran shook his head.

"I have had that thought also, Fidelma," he confided. "Nothing but solid earth lies below. There is no cellar, nor tunnel. The stone flags are laid on solid ground, so no person could enter the chamber by removing one of the floor stones. Besides," he smiled wryly, "what would Wulfstan have been doing during the commotion required to enter his chamber by the removing of the ceiling planks or floor slabs, or the removal of the bars of the window?"

Sister Fidelma smiled.

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"The pursuit of truth is paved by the consideration and rejection of all the alternatives, no matter how unlikely they may be, Laisran."

"The truth," replied the abbot, looking troubled, "is that it was impossible for the hand of man to strike down Wulfstan while he was locked alone in his chamber."

"Now that I *can* agree with."

Abbot Laisran looked puzzled.

"I thought you said that no sorcery was employed. Do you mean that he was not killed by the hand of a man?"

"No," grinned Sister Fidelma. "I mean that he was not alone in his chamber. It is a syllogism. Wulfstan was stabbed to death. Wulfstan was in his bedchamber. Therefore he was not alone in his bedchamber when he was killed."

"But . . ."

"We have ruled out the argument that our murderer could have come through the window. Do you agree?"

Laisran frowned, trying hard to follow the logic.

"We have ruled out the possibility that our murderer could have entered the chamber through the roof."

"Agreed."

"We have concluded that it would be impossible for the murderer to enter via the stone-flagged floor."

Abbot Laisran nodded emphatically.

"Then that leaves one obvious method of entry and exit."

Now Laisran was truly bewildered.

"I do not see . . ." he began.

"The chamber door. That is how our murderer gained entry and how he left."

"Impossible!" Laisran shook his head. "The door was secured from the inside."

"Nevertheless, that was how it was done. And whoever did it hoped that we would be so bemused by this curiosity that we would not inquire too deeply of the motive, for he hoped the motive was one that was obvious to all: The hatred of Wulfstan and the Saxons. Ideas of sorcery, of evil spirits, of Wulfstan being slain by no human hand, might cloud our judgement, or so our killer desired it to do."

"Then you know who the killer is?"

Fidelma shook her head.

"I have not questioned all the suspects. I think it is now time that we spoke with the Frankish prince, Dagobert."

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Dagobert was a young man who had been brought from the land of the Franks when he was a child. It was claimed that he was heir to the Frankish empire but his father had been deposed and the young prince had been taken into exile in Ireland until the time came when he could return. He was tall, dark, rather attractive, and spoke Irish almost as fluently as a native prince. Laisran had warned Sister Fidelma that the young man was well connected and betrothed to a princess of the kings of Cashel. There would be repercussions if Dagobert was not accorded the full letter of the Brehon Law.

"You know why you are here?" began Sister Fidelma.

"That I do," the young man smiled. "The Saxon pig, Wulfstan, has been slain. Outside the band of Saxons who followed the young whelp, there is a smile on the face of every student in Durrow. Does that surprise you, Sister Fidelma?"

"Perhaps not. I am told that you were known to have had an argument with him?"

Dagobert nodded.

"What about?"

"He was an arrogant pig. He insulted my ancestry and so I punched him on the nose."

"Wasn't that difficult to do, with his bodyguard? I am also told that Raedwald was never far away and he is a muscular young man."

Dagobert chuckled.

"Raedwald knew when to defend his prince and when not. He diplomatically left the room when the argument started. A man with a sense of honour is Raedwald of the South Saxons. Wulfstan treated him like dirt beneath his feet even though he was a thane and blood cousin."

Sister Fidelma reached into her robes and drew out the blood-stained embroidered linen kerchief and laid it on the table.

"Do you recognise this?"

Dagobert frowned and picked it up, turning it over in his hands with a puzzled expression.

"It is certainly mine. There is my motto. But the bloodstains . . . ?"

"It was found by the side of Wulfstan's body. I found it. It was obviously used to wipe the blood off the weapon that killed him."

Dagobert's face whitened.

"I did not kill Wulfstan. He was a pig but he simply needed a sound thrashing to teach him manners."

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"Then how came this kerchief to be by his side in his chamber?"

"I . . . I loaned it to someone."

"Who?"

Dagobert bit his lip, shrugging.

"Unless you wish to be blamed for this crime, Dagobert, you must tell me," insisted Fidelma.

"Two days ago I loaned the kerchief to Talorgen, the prince of Rheged."

Finan inclined his head to Sister Fidelma.

"Your reputation as an advocate of the Brehon Court precedes you, Sister," the dark, lean man greeted her. "Already it is whispered from Tara how you solved a plot to overthrow the High King."

Fidelma gestured Finan to be seated.

"People sometimes exaggerate another's prowess, for they love to create heroes and heroines to worship. You are professor of law here?"

"That is so. I am qualified to the level of *Sai,* being a professor of law only."

The *Sai* was a qualification of six years of study and the degree below that of *Anruth* held by Fidelma.

"And you taught Wulfstan?"

"Each of us has a cross to bear, as did Christ. Mine was the teaching of the Saxon thanes."

"Not all the Saxons?"

Finan shook his head.

"No. Only the three thanes, as they refused to sit at lessons with churls, and only the express order of the Abbot Laisran made them attend class with the other students. They were not humble before the altar of Christ. In fact, I formed the opinion that they secretly mocked Christ and clung to the worship of their outlandish god Woden."

"You disliked the Saxons?"

"I hated them!"

The vehemence in the man's voice made Sister Fidelma raise her eyebrows.

"Isn't hate an emotion unknown to a Brother of the order, especially one qualified as a *Sai?"*

"My sister and brother took up the robes of the religious and decided to accept a mission to preach the word of Christ in the lands of the East Saxons. A few years ago I encountered one of the

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missionaries who had gone in that band. They had arrived in the land of the East Saxons and sought to preach the word of Christ. The heathen Saxons stoned them to death, only two of the band escaping. Among those who met a martyr's fate were my own sister and brother. I have hated all Saxons ever since."

Sister Fidelma gazed into the dark eyes of Finan.

"Did you kill Wulfstan?"

Finan returned her scrutiny squarely.

"I could have done so at another time, in another place, I have the hatred in me. But no, Sister Fidelma, I did not kill him. Neither do I have the means to enter a barred room and leave it as though no one had entered."

Fidelma nodded slowly.

"You may go, Finan."

The professor of law rose reluctantly. He paused and said reflectively, "Wulfstan and Eadred were not liked by any in this monastery. Many young men with hot tempers have challenged them in combat since they have been here. Dagobert the Frank, for one. Only the fact that such challenges are forbidden on sacred soil has prevented bloodshed thus far."

Fidelma nodded absently.

"Is it true that the Saxons are leaving tomorrow?" Finan demanded.

She raised her head to look at him.

"They are returning with the body of Wulfstan to their own land," she affirmed.

A contented smile crossed Finan's face.

"I cannot pretend that I regret that, even if it has cost one of their lives to prompt the move. I had hoped that they would have left Durrow yesterday."

She glanced up at the law professor, interested.

"Why would they leave?"

"Some Saxon messenger arrived at the monastery yesterday afternoon seeking Wulfstan and Eadred. I half-hoped that it was a summons to return to their country. However, praise be that they are departing now."

Fidelma frowned in annoyance.

"Let me remind you, Finan, that unless we find the culprit, not only this centre of learning, but all the five kingdoms of Éireann will be at risk, for the Saxons will surely want to take compensation for the death of their prince."

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Talorgen of Rheged was a youth of average stature, fresh-faced and sandy of hair. He already wore a wispy moustache, but his cheeks and chin were clean shaven.

"Yes. It is no secret that I challenged Wulfstan and Eadred to combat."

His Irish, though accented, was fluent and he seemed at ease as he sat in the chair Sister Fidelma had indicated.

"Why?"

Talorgen grinned impishly.

"I hear that you have questioned Eadred. From his manner you may judge Wulfstan's arrogance. It is not hard to be provoked by them, even if they were not Saxons."

"You do not like Saxons?"

"They are not likable."

"But you are a prince of Rheged, and it is reported that the Saxons are attacking your land."

Talorgen nodded, his mouth pinched. "Oswy calls himself Christian king of Northumbria, but he still sends his barbaric hordes against the kingdoms of the Britons. For generations now the people of my land have fought to hold back the Saxons, for their thirst for land and power is great. Owain, my father, sent me here, but I would, by the living Christ, rather be at his side, wielding my sword against the Saxon foemen. My blade should drink the blood of the enemies of my blood."

Sister Fidelma regarded the flushed-faced young man with curiosity.

"Has your blade already drunk of the blood of your people's enemies?"

Talorgen frowned abruptly, hesitating, and then his face relaxed. He chuckled.

"You mean, did I kill Wulfstan? That I did not. I swear by the living God! But hear me, Sister Fidelma, it is not that I did not want to. Truly, sometimes the faith of Christ is a hard taskmaster. Wulfstan and his cousin Eadred were so dislikable that I scarcely believe there is anyone in this community who regrets the death of Wulfstan."

She took out the bloodstained kerchief and laid it on the table.

"This was found by the body of Wulfstan. It was used to wipe the blood from the weapon that killed him. It belongs to Dagobert."

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"You mean Dagobert . . . ?" The prince of Rheged's eyes opened wide as he stared from the kerchief to Sister Fidelma.

"Dagobert tells me that he gave you this kerchief in loan two days ago."

Talorgen examined the kerchief carefully and then slowly nodded.

"He is right. It is the same one, I can tell from the embroidery."

"How then did it get into Wulfstan's chamber?"

Talorgen shrugged.

"That I do not know. I remember having it in my chamber yesterday morning. I saw it was gone and thought Dagobert had collected it."

Sister Fidelma regarded Talorgen steadily for a moment or two.

"I swear, Sister," said the prince of Rheged earnestly, "I would not have hesitated to kill Wulfstan outside these walls, but I did not kill him within them."

"You are forthright, Talorgen."

The young man shrugged.

"I am sprung of the house of Urien of Rheged, whose praise was sung by our great bard Taliesin. Urien was the Golden King of the North, slain in stealth by a traitor. Our house is even-handed, just, and forthright. We believe in honesty. We meet our enemies in daylight on the plain of battle, not at night in the darkened recesses of some bedchamber."

"You say that there are many others in this community who held enmity against Wulfstan? Was there anyone in particular that you had in mind?"

Talorgen pursed his lips.

"Our teacher Finan often told us that he hated the Saxons."

Sister Fidelma nodded.

"I have spoken with Finan."

"As you already know, Dagobert quarrelled with Wulfstan in the refectory and bloodied his mouth two nights ago. Then there was Riderch of Dumnonia, Fergna of Midhe, and . . ."

Sister Fidelma held up her hand.

"I think that you have made your point, Talorgen. Everyone in Durrow is a suspect."

Sister Fidelma found Raedwald in the stables making preparations for the journey back to the land of the South Saxons.

"There is a question I would ask you on your own, Raedwald. Need I remind you of my authority?"

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The Saxon warrior shook his head.

"I have learnt much of your law and customs since I have been in your country, Sister. I am not as Eadred."

"And you have learnt some fluency in our tongue," observed Fidelma. "More fluency and understanding than your cousin."

"It is not my place to criticise the heir apparent to the kingship of the South Saxons."

"But I think that you did not like your cousin Wulfstan?"

Raedwald blinked in surprise at her directness and then he shrugged.

"I am merely a thane in the house of Cissa. I cannot like or dislike my appointed king."

"Why were you not on guard outside the chamber of Wulfstan last night?"

"It was not the custom. Once Wulfstan had secured himself inside, he was well guarded. You have seen the chamber he asked Abbot Laisran to devise for him. Once he was locked inside, there was, apparently, no danger to him. I slept in the next chamber and at his call should he need help."

"But he did not call?"

"His killer slashed his throat with his first blow. That much was obvious from his body."

"It becomes obvious that he willingly let the killer into his chamber. Therefore, he knew the killer and trusted him."

Raedwald's eyes narrowed.

Fidelma continued.

"Tell me, the messenger who arrived from your country yesterday, what message did he bring Wulfstan?"

Raedwald shook his head.

"That message was for Wulfstan only."

"Is the messenger still here?"

"Yes."

"Then I would question him."

"You may question but he will not answer you." Raedwald smiled grimly.

Sister Fidelma compressed her lips in annoyance.

"Another Saxon custom? Not even your messengers will speak with women?"

"Another Saxon custom, yes. But this is a custom of kings. The royal messenger has his tongue cut out so that he can never verbally

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betray the message that he carries from kings and princes to those who might be their enemies."

Abbot Laisran gestured to those he had summoned to his study chamber, at Sister Fidelma's request, to be seated. They had entered the room with expressions either of curiosity or defiance, according to their different personalities, as they saw Sister Fidelma standing before the high-mantled hearth. She seemed absorbed in her own thoughts as she stood, hands folded demurely before her, not apparently noticing them as they seated themselves around. Brother Ultan, as steward of the community, took his stand before the door with hands folded into his habit.

Abbot Laisran gave Fidelma an anxious glance and then he, too, took his seat.

"Why are we here?" demanded Talorgen abruptly.

Fidelma raised her head to return his gaze.

"You are here to learn how Wulfstan died and by whose hand," she replied sharply.

There was a brief pause before Eadred turned to her with a sneer.

"We already know how my kinsman Wulfstan died, woman. He died by the sorcery of a barbarian. Who that barbarian is, it is not hard to deduce. It was one of the *welisc* savages, Talorgen."

Talorgen was on his feet, fists clenched.

"Repeat your charges outside the walls of this abbey and I will meet your steel with mine, Saxon cur!"

Dagobert came to his feet to intervene as Eadred launched forward from his chair towards Talorgen.

"Stop this!" The usually genial features of Laisran were dark with anger. His voice cut the air like a lash.

The students of the ecclesiastical school of Durrow seemed to freeze at the sound. Then Eadred relaxed and dropped back in his seat with a smile that was more a sneer than amusement. Dagobert tugged at Talorgen's arm and the prince of Rheged sighed and reseated himself, as did the Frankish prince.

Abbot Laisran growled like an angry bear.

"Sister Fidelma is an official of the Brehon Court of Éireann. Whatever the customs in your own lands, in this land she has supreme authority in conducting this investigation and the full backing of the law of this kingdom. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a silence.

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"I shall continue," said Fidelma quietly. "Yet what Eadred says is partially true."

Eadred stared at her with bewilderment clouding his eyes.

"Oh yes," smiled Fidelma. *"One* of you at least knows how Wulfstan died and who is responsible."

She paused to let her words sink in.

"Let me first tell you how he died."

"He was stabbed to death in his bed," Finan, the dark-faced professor of law, pointed out.

"That is true," agreed Sister Fidelma, "but without the aid of sorcery."

"How else did the assassin enter a locked room and leave it, still locked from the inside?" demanded Eadred. "How else but sorcery?"

"The killer wanted us to think that it was sorcery. Indeed, the killer prepared an elaborate plan to confuse us and lay the blame away from him. In fact, so elaborate was the plan that it had several layers. One layer was merely to confuse and frighten us by causing us to think the murder was done by a supernatural agency; another was to indicate an obvious suspect, while a third object was to implicate another person."

"Well," Laisran sighed, "at the moment I have yet to see through the first layer."

Sister Fidelma smiled briefly at the rotund abbot.

"I will leave that to later. Let us firstly consider the method of the killing."

She had their complete attention now.

"The assassin entered the room by the door. In fact, Wulfstan let his assassin into the bedchamber himself."

There was an intake of breath from the usually taciturn Raedwald.

Unperturbed, she continued.

"Wulfstan knew his killer. Indeed, he had no suspicions, no fear of this man."

Abbot Laisran regarded her with open-mouthed astonishment.

"Wulfstan let the killer in," she continued. "The assassin struck. He killed Wulfstan and left his body on the bed. It was an act of swiftness. To spread suspicion, the killer wiped his knife on a linen kerchief which he mistakenly thought belonged to Talorgen, prince of Rheged. As I said, if we managed to see beyond the charade of sorcery, then the assassin sought to put the blame for the murder on Talorgen. He failed to realise that the kerchief was borrowed

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two days ago from Dagobert. He did not realise that the kerchief prominently carried Dagobert's motto on it. It was a Latin motto which exhorts 'Beware what you say!' "

She paused to let them digest this information.

"How then did the killer now leave the bedchamber and manage to bar the door from the inside?" asked Dagobert.

"The bedchamber door was barred with two wooden bars. They were usually placed on iron rests which are attached to the frame of the door. When I examined the first wooden bar I observed that at either end there were two pieces of twine wrapped around it as if to protect the wood when it is placed in the iron rests. Yet on the second wooden bar, the curiosity was that the twine had two lengths of four feet still loose. Each end of the twine had been frayed and charred."

She grimaced and repeated herself.

"A curiosity. Then I noticed that there was a rail at the top of the door on which a heavy woollen curtain could be drawn across the door when closed in order to prevent a draught. It was, of course, impossible to see whether the curtain had been drawn or not once the room was broken into, for the inward movement of the door would have swept the curtain aside on its rail."

Eadred made a gesture of impatience.

"Where is this explanation leading?"

"Patience, and I will tell you. I spotted two small spots of grease on the ground on either side of the door. As I bent to examine these spots of grease I saw two nails fixed into the wood about three inches from the ground. There were two short pieces of twine still tied on these nails and the ends were frayed and blackened. It was then I realised just how the assassin had left the room and left one of the bars in place."

"One?" demanded Abbot Laisran, leaning forward on his seat, his face eager.

Fidelma nodded.

"Only one was really needed to secure the door from the inside. The first bar, that at three feet from the bottom of the door, had not been set in place. There were no marks on the bar and its twine protection was intact, nor had the iron rests been wrenched away from the doorjamb when Ultan forced the door. Therefore, the conclusion was that this bar was not in place. Only the second bar, that which rested across the top of the door, about two feet from the top, had been in place."

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"Go on," instructed Laisran when she paused again.

"Having killed Wulfstan, the assassin was already prepared. He undid the twine on both ends of the wooden bar and threaded it around the wooden curtain rail across the top of the door. He set in place, or had already placed them during the day, when the chamber was open, two nails. Then he raised the wooden bar to the level of the curtain rail. He secured it there by tying the ends of the twine to the nails at ground level. This construction allowed him to leave the room."

Laisran gestured with impatience.

"Yes, but how could he have manipulated the twine to lower the bar in place?"

"Simply. He took two reed candles and as he went to leave, he placed a candle under either piece of the string near the ground. He took a piece of paper and lit it from his tinder box—I found the ashes of the paper on the floor of the chamber, where he had to drop it. He lit the two reed candles, on either side of the door under the twine. Then he left quickly. The twine eventually burned through, releasing the bar, which dropped neatly into place in the iron rests. It had, remember, only two feet to drop. The candles continued to burn until they became mere spots of grease, almost unnoticeable, except I slipped on one. But the result was that we were left with a mystery. A room locked on the inside with a corpse. Sorcery? No. Planning by a devious mind."

"So what happened then?" Talorgen encouraged, breaking the spellbound silence.

"The assassin left the room, as I have described. He wanted to create this illusion of mystery because the person he wished to implicate was one he felt his countrymen would believe to be a barbaric sorcerer. As I indicated, he wished to place suspicion on you, Talorgen. He left the room and talked to someone outside Wulfstan's bedchamber for a while. Then they heard the bar drop into place and that was the assassin's alibi, because it was clear that they had heard Wulfstan, still alive, slide the bar to lock his chamber door."

Raedwald was frowning as it seemed he struggled to follow her reasoning.

"You have given an excellent reconstruction," he said slowly. "But it is only a hypothesis. It remains only a hypothesis unless you name the assassin and his motive."

Sister Fidelma smiled softly.

"Very well. I was, of course, coming to that."

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She turned and let her gaze pass over their upraised faces as they watched her. Then she let her gaze rest on the haughty features of the thane of Andredswald.

Eadred interpreted her gaze as accusation and was on his feet before she had said a word, his face scowling in anger.

Ultan, the steward, moved swiftly across the room to stand before Sister Fidelma, in anticipation lest Eadred let his emotions, which were clearly visible on his angry features, overcome him.

"You haven't told us the motive," Dagobert the Frank said softly. "Why would the thane of Andredswald murder his own cousin and prince?"

Sister Fidelma continued to stare at the arrogant Saxon.

"I have not yet said that the thane of Andredswald is the assassin," she said softly. "But as for motive, the motive is the very laws of the Saxon society, which, thanks be to God, are not our laws."

Abbot Laisran was frowning.

"Explain, Fidelma. I do not understand."

"A Saxon prince succeeds to the kingship by primogeniture. The eldest son inherits."

Dagobert nodded impatiently.

"That is also so with our Frankish succession. But how does this provide the motive for Wulfstan's murder?"

"Two days ago a messenger from the kingdom of the South Saxons arrived here. His message was for Wulfstan. I discovered what his message was."

"How?" demanded Raedwald. "Royal messengers have their tongues cut out to prevent them revealing such secrets."

Fidelma grinned.

"So you told me. Fortunately this poor man was taught to write by Diciul, the missionary of Éireann who brought Christianity and learning to your country of the South Saxons."

"What was the message?" asked Laisran.

"Wulfstan's father had died, another victim of the yellow plague. Wulfstan was now king of the South Saxons and urged to return home at once."

She glanced at Raedwald.

The big Saxon nodded silently in agreement.

"You admitted that much to me when I questioned you, Raedwald," went on Fidelma. "When I asked you if you liked Wulfstan you answered that it was not up to you to like or dislike your ap-

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pointed king. A slip of the tongue, but it alerted me to the possible motive."

Raedwald said nothing.

"In such a barbaric system of succession, where the order of birth is the only criterion for claiming an inheritance or kingdom, there are no safeguards. In Éireann, as among our cousins in Britain, a chieftain or king not only has to be of a bloodline but has to be elected by the *derbhfine* of his family. Without such a safeguard it becomes obvious to me that only the death of a predecessor removes the obstacles of the aspirant to the throne."

Raedwald pursed his lips and said softly: "This is so."

"And, with Wulfstan's death, Eadred will now succeed to the kingship?"

"Yes."

Eadred's face was livid with anger.

"I did not kill Wulfstan!"

Sister Fidelma turned and stared deeply into his eyes.

"I believe you, for Raedwald is the assassin," she said calmly.

Finan made a grab at Raedwald as the muscular Saxon thane sought desperately to escape from the room. Dagobert leapt forward together with Ultan, the steward, to help restrain the struggling man. When the thane of Staeningum had been overpowered, Sister Fidelma turned to the others.

"I said that the assassin had a devious mind. Yet in the attempt to lead false trails, Raedwald over-excelled himself and brought suspicion down on him. In trying to implicate Talorgen, Raedwald made a mistake and caused confusion by thinking the kerchief to be Talorgen's. It bore Dagobert's motto in Latin. Raedwald has no Latin and so did not spot his mistake. This also ruled out Eadred from suspicion, as Eadred knew Latin to the degree that he could recognise Dagobert's motto."

She settled her gaze on Eadred.

"If you had also been slain, then Raedwald was next in line to the kingship, was he not?"

Eadred made an affirmative gesture.

"But . . ."

"Raedwald was going to implicate you as the assassin and then show how you tried to put the blame on Talorgen. He would have either had you tried for murder under our law or, if all else failed . . . I doubt whether you would have returned safely to the land of the South Saxons. Perhaps you might have fallen overboard on the sea

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voyage. Whichever way, both Wulfstan and you would have been removed from the succession, leaving it clear for Raedwald to claim the throne."

Eadred shook his head wonderingly. His voice was tinged with reluctant admiration.

"Never would I have suspected that a woman possessed such a meticulous mind to unravel the deviousness of this treachery in the way that you have done. I shall look upon your office with a new perspective."

Eadred turned abruptly to the Abbot Laisran.

"I and my men will depart now, for we must return to my country. With your permission, Abbot, I shall take Raedwald with me as my prisoner. He will stand trial according to our laws and his punishment will be prescribed by them."

Abbot Laisran inclined his head in agreement.

Eadred moved to the door, and as he did so, his eyes caught sight of Talorgen of Rheged.

"Well, *welisc*. It seems I owe you an apology for wrongly accusing you of the murder of Wulfstan. I so apologise."

Talorgen slowly stood up, his face trying to control his surprise.

"Your apology is accepted, Saxon."

Eadred paused and then he frowned.

"The apology notwithstanding, there can never be peace between us, *welisc!*"

Talorgen sniffed.

"The day such a peace will come is when you and your Saxon hordes will depart from the shores of Britain and return to the land whence you came."

Eadred stiffened, his hand going to his waist, then he paused and relaxed and almost smiled.

"Well said, *welisc*. It will never be peace!"

He strode from the room with Ultan and Dagobert leading Raedwald after him.

Talorgen turned and smiled briefly towards Sister Fidelma.

"Truly, there are wise judges among the Brehons of Ireland."

Then he, too, was gone. Finan, the professor of law, hesitated a moment.

"Truly, now I know why your reputation is great, Fidelma of Kildare."

Sister Fidelma gave a small sigh as he left.

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"Well, Fidelma," Abbot Laisran smiled in satisfaction, reaching for a jug of wine, "it seems that I have provided you with some diversion on your pilgrimage to the shrine of the Blessed Patrick at Ard Macha."

Sister Fidelma responded to the rotund abbot's wry expression.

"A diversion, yes. Though I would have preferred something of a more pleasant nature to have occupied my time."

DETECTIVERSE

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

(From the kitchen of 007)

by B. W. LEMING

All ingredients to be assembled
and allowed to rise
then
punched down, pounded to a pulp,
hacked and smacked
hashed and mashed
creamed
crushed
and beaten silly.

Can be grilled
but
Best if iced.

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A newcomer to our field, Ben Klein makes his home in Woodstock, New York. His previous published work includes poetry and three short stories, two for The Journal of the American Medical Association *and one for the literary magazine* Satori. *His crime fiction debut is also the beginning of a series featuring Dr. Illya Petrakov, whom he describes as "Russian emigré, world-weary pathologist, and reluctant coroner . . ."*

DR. PETRAKOV'S RECIPE

by BEN KLEIN

The telephone on Dr. Petrakov's bedside stand rang with the ear-splitting chirp of an electronic bird. It was a sound Petrakov hated, just one of the features of his American life which added to the load of weariness he had brought with him from the Soviet Union. He rolled over in bed and picked up the receiver.

"Petrakov," he said, his voice hoarse with sleep.

"Sorry to wake you, Doc," said the caller.

"Who is this?" asked Petrakov as he fumbled with his glasses and looked at the lighted dial of the clock by the phone. It was four in the morning.

"It's Sheriff Pye. I'm afraid we got some bidness for you."

"Bidness" was the sheriff's word for an out-of-context corpse. In America, Petrakov had discovered, death was something spoken about only indirectly. There were all sorts of words for it, words that belonged more properly to missed trains or parking meters.

"Business?" asked Petrakov.

"A girl. Mid-twenties or so. Sooside, looks like. Can you meet me down at the morgue?"

"Yes, sure. I'll be right there," he said.

" 'Preciate it," said the sheriff.

Petrakov hung up the phone and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He turned on the lamp and squinted at his wife; Vera Petrakova was still asleep. She was the opposite of Dr. Petrakov:

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He had trouble sleeping, she, waking up. He watched her blanket fall and rise, his gaze a mixture of affection and resentment. Running his hand through his thinning hair he rose from the bed, quietly gathered his clothes, and slipped out of the bedroom.

Petrakov dropped his clothes on a chair in the kitchen, transferred the previous night's coffee to a battered enamelware pot, and put it on the stove to heat. He lit his first cigarette of the day and wedged it into an ashtray on the kitchen table as he dressed with the automatic motions of a man still half-asleep. These middle-of-the-night calls were a rarity; there wasn't much work for a small-town coroner.

As a coroner Petrakov was an amateur; two weeks of lectures in forensic medicine during his training had been the extent of his experience before taking the job. His current responsibilities—pathologist in the local hundred-bed hospital, and town coroner—had come about through a series of unforeseen circumstances: the plane carrying Petrakov and his wife from Leningrad to New York rerouted to Atlanta because of fog, last-minute hotel accommodations across the street from the Centers for Disease Control, a chance meeting with an aggressive physician recruiter. Within a week of arriving in the United States Petrakov had found himself in a small town near the Florida border being shown around Welburn Lying-In Hospital by a matronly woman with a face made up like a kabuki actor. The tour wound its way through half a dozen wards and twice that number of awkward introductions, ending up in the basement. The pathology department was empty except for two somnolent technicians in the adjacent laboratory. On that November afternoon, left alone amid the stainless steel and tiles, Petrakov had felt as though he'd been caught by a great wind and swept down the Eastern seaboard. Staring out through the mist that coated the basement window of the lab as he had peered through the fog shrouding Kennedy International Airport, Petrakov was still trying to find the Manhattan skyline.

Petrakov left the house with a cup of bitter, black coffee, looking as if he had slept in his clothes. The drive to the hospital was short, the hospital parking lot empty save for the sheriff's mud-spattered GMC and an ambulance. When Petrakov arrived at the door of the lab he found it ajar, the sheriff and two nervous attendants flanking a draped corpse on the dissecting table.

"Thanks for comin' in so early, Doc," said Pye.

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"You're welcome. What can you tell me?" asked Petrakov, sitting down in a rolling chair near the door.

"Why don't you boys step outside for a minute," said Pye to the attendants. They were only too happy to oblige.

"Well, we got the call about two A.M.," Pye continued. "A girlfriend. Apparently the victim failed to show up for work last night. She's a receptionist down at the fitness club. Was, I mean. Anyway, the girlfriend tried calling until one or so in the morning and when she didn't get an answer she went over to check on her. Thought maybe she was sick or something. She knocked, got no answer, the door was open so she went inside. Found the girl lying on the floor. Called us from there. I had the EMT's meet us but she was already cold by the time we got there. Must've died sometime earlier. Not a mark on her. Must've been pills or something."

Petrakov lit a cigarette. There were a lot of "must've's." He stood up and began taking off his coat.

"Anything else?" he asked the sheriff.

"That's about it. Should be pretty routine."

Petrakov shrugged.

"I'll get to work and let you know what I find," he said, opening the door for Pye.

" 'Preciate it," said the sheriff on his way out.

Petrakov hung his coat on a metal rack, then entered his office, no more than an alcove off the lab. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. The sun was just beginning to come up, but as yet the only light in the lab came from the harsh, fluorescent lamps. Petrakov sighed; a postmortem on a young girl was not a particularly promising way to begin the day.

After setting up the electric coffeepot on his desk Petrakov went back out into the lab and put on an apron and some gloves. He turned on the overhead microphone and prepared to begin his examination. He pulled back the sheet covering the girl, leaving it dangling from the foot of the table. She was pretty, even in death. From the look of her body Petrakov guessed that she had been a patron of the club where she worked as well as its receptionist. He ran his eyes quickly over the body, mechanically scanning for any telltale signs of trauma. It was clear that she had been dead for several hours—blood had pooled in her flanks leaving them plum-colored owing to the effect of gravity unopposed by vascular tone. When he looked at her feet he noticed the sheriff's first omission. Across the dorsum of each foot was a narrow, depressed band of bluish discolor-

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ation, as if the feet had been bound, perhaps to some third object. Petrakov took a magnifying lens from a shelf behind him and took a closer look.

There were no stray hemp fibers or any other foreign material visible on the left foot. On the right, however, within the bluish band, was a small spot, darker than the surrounding discoloration. There was a minuscule speck of dried blood at the center of the spot. Petrakov was familiar with such lesions from many autopsies of patients who had died after receiving care in hospital; they were made by syringes.

Petrakov's stomach signaled him with a burning sensation which began roughly beneath the fourth button of his shirt and spread in a slow wave toward his back. His dyspepsia served as a reliable early warning system, flaring up whenever he was presented with a discrepancy between appearance and fact.

He removed a scalpel and a jar of preservative solution from a wide metal drawer beneath the table and carefully excised a full-thickness island of tissue surrounding the lesion. Beneath the island was a collapsed vein, flat and brown like a sun-dried worm. Petrakov took a two-centimeter section of the vein as well and placed both specimens in the jar of formalin. He set it aside to be prepared for frozen section later, and was about to begin the dissection proper when his assistant arrived.

Welburn Lying-In had an arrangement with a medical school two hundred miles to the north whereby third-year students were allowed to spend six weeks on one of the wards as part of their training. Petrakov had not been asked if he was willing to participate in the program. A student had simply appeared two weeks after Petrakov had started working.

His current charge was a young woman not much older than the girl on the dissecting table. She wore upside-down glasses and her hair pulled back in an abbreviated ponytail. Her pockets were always full of an astonishing array of medical toys: pinwheels for evaluating peripheral sensation, various rulers, each calibrated differently, for measuring the intervals between Q-waves, alpha waves, waves Petrakov had never even heard of, let alone measured. She carried two tuning forks, a goniometer for measuring range of motion, even vials of peppermint and coffee for assessing sense of smell. All these things bulged and depended from her pockets and made her look to Petrakov a bit like a peddler.

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She brought these things each day even though Petrakov had assured her she'd have no use for them in his department since they were designed to quantify life functions and all of Petrakov's clients were dead. He told her instead to bring her curiosity, intuition, and a book which had nothing whatsoever to do with medicine. Each of these, he told her, would be of more use than her instruments. But she didn't take his advice; she was apparently afraid that one day there might be an urgent need to assess someone's sense of smell and she did not wish to be found wanting when that moment arrived.

When she walked through the door to the lab Petrakov was bent over the young victim, scalpel in hand. He heard Schiller take an abrupt, shallow breath and let the door close behind her, the wheeze of its hydraulic hinge mechanism seeming to take forever to die in the air.

"Good morning, Dr. Petrakov," she said, backing up against the door, her hand still on the knob.

"Good morning, Miss Schiller," said Petrakov, looking up at her, the scalpel frozen for the moment in mid-strike. Neither of them moved, Schiller staring at the scalpel as if to will it into immobility, Petrakov hesitating as if waiting for the go-ahead. Then, aware at last of the source of her discomfiture, he said, "Why don't you get the sectioning machine warmed up. I'll have a lot of specimens to prepare."

Trying not to show her relief, which was evident nevertheless in the uncharacteristic speed with which she divested herself of her coat and put on her apron and gloves, Schiller walked past the table looking straight ahead and busied herself with the sectioning apparatus.

Petrakov put on his mask; behind the plastic face shield his watery eyes appeared even more indistinct, and with the sides of his beard poking out from the mask he looked like a deep-sea diver about to take the plunge. He made a long, graceful incision extending from the xiphoid process to the pubis and dissected down through the peritoneum. After placing clamps on the peritoneum he took a long thermometer from the drawer, delivered the left lobe of the liver into the wound, and poked the thermometer into it. He waited for a full three minutes, occasionally glancing over at Schiller, who was resolutely seeing to it that all specks of dust had been removed from her machine. Petrakov removed the thermometer and read it—18° C. He placed the thermometer in one of the shallow trays lying beside the victim and did some calculations. He knew

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that the body had been moved at least twice, once from the apartment into the ambulance and again into the lab, where it had lain for some time now on the cold dissecting table. Though he couldn't be precise, he placed the time of death sometime in the late afternoon the day before, early evening at the latest.

Petrakov returned his attention to the abdomen. A puddle of blood had now collected in the wound and he was immediately struck by its frothy appearance. He hesitated for a moment, trying to attach the appropriate significance to this observation, and he was about to continue the dissection when he suddenly turned to Schiller and said, "Fill the sink with water."

"What is it?"

"Just fill the sink, quickly," said Petrakov, his voice more of a command than a request.

Against the sound of water splashing into the sink could now be heard Petrakov's saw cutting through the sternum. Once the rib cage had been separated with the spreader, Petrakov took a series of long, curved clamps and placed them on the great vessels exiting the heart. He did this by feel, his eyes fixed on some imaginary point on the ceiling as his hands found their way inside the chest. Petrakov worked quickly and as he worked he resisted the impulse to leap to any conclusions. He had two things going for him as a coroner, despite his lack of experience. The first was a genuine respect for the fragile nature of the chain of evidence he was charged with establishing and maintaining. The second was a magpie's instinct for collecting things. For Petrakov the collection process was itself satisfying, and during the early stages of an investigation he did not order the values of pieces of data; in true magpie fashion he brought both pebbles and diamonds back to the nest, sorting them only later.

When he had applied all of his clamps Petrakov divided the vessels and was now ready to deliver the heart.

"Is the sink full?" he asked.

"Yes, with tepid water. I hope that's all right," said Schiller, caught up now in a sense of urgency she didn't yet understand.

Petrakov brought the heart over to the sink and immediately thrust it deep into the water, holding it at the bottom of the sink with one hand as he reached for a second scalpel.

"You have seen an air embolism, Miss Schiller?"

"No, but I've heard of it, of course. I know it's something nurses worry about when they give injections."

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"Quite so. They worry for nothing, however. It takes a great deal of air to cause any harm, about one hundred cc's if I'm not mistaken."

Petrakov was now ready for the next step.

"Watch very closely, Miss Schiller. You may be called upon to testify as a witness should my suspicions prove correct. If they do not," said Petrakov, "you will probably think me a foolish old man."

"No chance of that, Dr. Petrakov," said Schiller, looking at him out of the corner of her eye as if he were a foolish old man.

Petrakov took the scalpel and carefully made an incision in the muscular layer surrounding the base of the heart. As he did so, a thin ribbon of blood drifted up through the clear water. When the edge of the scalpel cleaved through to the ventricle, a sudden gush of pink bubbles burst forth from the heart and wobbled quickly up to the surface where they coalesced and popped audibly. Schiller seemed disappointed.

"Is that it?" she asked.

Petrakov took his hands from the water and leaned on the edge of the sink. He watched as the heart rose slowly to the surface where it bobbed forlornly.

"Yes," he said quietly, "that's it."

"So what does it mean?"

Petrakov pulled off his gloves and mask.

"It means murder, Miss Schiller."

The mention of the word murder had a galvanic effect on Schiller and she joined enthusiastically in the remainder of the examination. They worked together collecting specimens from every nook and cranny of the body: samples of blood from the heart and peripheral circulation; urine from both the bladder and the kidney for toxicological analysis; specimens of liver, heart, and lung tissue; samples from the walls of the great vessels. Schiller watched with jaw muscles twitching and her hands clasped tightly to her chest as Petrakov sawed through the back of the calvarium. In the brain he found microscopic hemorrhages consistent with the effect of micro-emboli; presumably a few small air bubbles had escaped the heart and found their way into the small vessels of the brain where they had become impacted like tiny corks, obstructing the flow of blood downstream. Petrakov found a considerable amount of food in the stomach and jejunum, only partially digested, suggesting that death had overtaken its victim not long after she had eaten dinner. This was also congruent with his rough placement of the time of death. He divided the stomach contents into two portions, the first for toxicological

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studies and the second put aside in formalin simply for the sake of his magpie mind.

Once all of the requisite specimens had been obtained and prepared for the sectioning machine, Petrakov and Schiller washed up and left for the cafeteria on the second floor. A thin cloud of formalin trailed behind them and was cut off by the closing elevator door. The cafeteria was almost empty, most hospital employees having finished their lunch hours well before. Petrakov followed Schiller onto the lunch line, where they picked among the leftovers. Petrakov, who took only what was necessary to quiet the sentinel in his stomach, watched in amazement as Schiller piled dish after dish onto her tray: chicken, peas and potatoes, a bowl of greasy vegetable soup, peach cobbler, soda, milk, and coffee. To Petrakov the persistence of appetite in the face of aesthetic assault seemed uniquely American and therefore mystifying.

They took seats in a back corner of the cafeteria. While he stirred his yogurt pensively, eating but a few spoonfuls of it, Schiller attacked her lunch with gusto. As she expertly stripped the chicken of meat, noisily sucking on the bones before discarding them in a neat pile on the side of her tray, she managed to ask Petrakov a few questions.

"How can you be sure she was murdered? Couldn't she have administered a syringe full of air herself?"

Petrakov lit a cigarette, discarding the half-finished yogurt for a Styrofoam cup of burned coffee.

"In the first place it does not seem likely to me that a woman would choose such a method for killing herself. If she knew enough to use it she would also know that it might fail to kill her, leaving her incapacitated with a massive stroke. In the second place, the police made no mention of finding a syringe where the woman was found. Given the postmortem findings, I would guess that unconsciousness, and subsequent death, would have occurred within a minute or two of the injection. This would not leave much time for the woman to dispose of the syringe. Indeed, if she had committed suicide I cannot imagine why she would wish to obscure the means she had used."

"Wouldn't it be smart to get some background on her medical history? Maybe she was being treated for depression or something."

"All these facts will be gathered by the police in any case. With luck they will point to a conclusive answer and such speculation will not be necessary."

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"Will you be able to identify the killer? I mean, if there was one."

"You are asking the wrong person. Perhaps you would prefer to spend the balance of your time here with the police. They are in a better position to answer your questions," said Petrakov.

Schiller either failed to pick up the veiled rebuke or ignored it.

"Are you going to call them?" she asked.

"There is still a great deal of work to do."

Petrakov got up from the table, suddenly tired of answering questions. He pictured the young woman lying on the dissecting table, waiting.

"Why don't you take your time with the rest of your lunch. It isn't healthy to eat so fast. I will get back to work."

"All right," she said, and she plunged her fork into the peach cobbler.

Petrakov returned to the lab and started sewing the corpse back together. He sutured the wound on the right foot, closed the abdominal and chest incisions with both subcutaneous and retention sutures, and repaired the damage he had done to the skull. When he was finished, the body looked presentable. He noticed, however, as he drew the drape over the body, that the woman's facial expression seemed to have changed during the course of the examination. One corner of the mouth was now cocked in a sneer.

When Schiller got back from lunch, Petrakov sent her on several errands. Among other places, he dispatched her to the Medical Records Department to see if the victim had ever been a patient in the hospital. He told her that if she turned up any hospital records she was to call the attending physician and ask for the office charts in order to determine whether the victim had been treated for any chronic diseases, including depression. He also sent her to the library to review the presentations of emboli of various types, assuring her that this was the best way to reinforce her observations of the morning. This was Petrakov's way of getting her out of his hair for the remainder of the day.

As the slides became available during the afternoon, Petrakov examined each one under the microscope, photographing those he thought would be pertinent to the case. He looked at the sections of the island of tissue he had excised from the foot and was able to isolate the needle track. He matched this with a similar lesion in the section of vein he had removed from beneath it. The toxicological studies he had requested were being processed and would not be available until the following day, and Petrakov tried not to specu-

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late on what they would reveal. As he worked he sought alternative explanations to connect his findings in a more concise or economical manner, but, like iron filings to a magnet, his thoughts continued to cluster around the diagnosis of a homicide.

Vera Petrakova called the lab at six o'clock, having neither seen nor heard from her husband since the previous evening.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Where do you think I am?" Petrakov said testily. "You called me here at the lab and I answered the telephone."

"You sound tired, Ilie."

Petrakov fumbled for his cigarettes.

"I got a call at four this morning and I had to come in to work on a case. Yes, I am tired."

"When will you be home?"

"Soon, Vera. I am almost through for the day."

"I'll have your dinner ready, Ilie."

"All right," Petrakov said wearily.

"Ilie?"

"Yes?"

"You will drive carefully?"

"I will drive carefully, Vera."

"I can't wait to see you, Ilie," said Vera Petrakova.

"Soon," said Petrakov, hanging up the phone.

Petrakov placed a call to the Emergency Room, asking that two orderlies be sent to his department to put the body away until it could be picked up by the mortuary. They came almost immediately. Petrakov straightened up the lab, washed down the table, and filed the slides he had prepared. He turned out the lights and headed for home.

As he drove home Petrakov's mind fabricated an image of the young woman's face, complete with the sneerlike twist of the upper lip. He was still a comparative stranger to homicide cases, his practice having been devoted to deaths due to disease, trauma, or medical misadventure. He couldn't help but imagine the woman's life before death had intervened; he pictured her in the fitness club, another expression of American life he found puzzling. He knew from television that such clubs were parts of an archipelago of narcissism which extended from ocean to ocean, founded on the principle of the perfectibility of the human organism. Petrakov harbored no such illusions, perhaps because he spent so much of his time among the newly dead. As he pulled up to the dingy white house

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he and his wife had rented, the last image he had conjured up, of his own flabby body being stretched like a piece of taffy between the unforgiving metal arms of a fitness machine, gratefully dissipated.

Vera Petrakova was solicitous when he entered the house. The food she had prepared was nutritious but almost inedible, as usual; she had instincts for neither cooking nor housekeeping. When they had first settled in the house she had bought every kind of cleaning substance available, and though she splashed these liberally around the house she succeeded only in coating everything with a waxy patina.

Petrakov picked at his food while the chattering of his wife hung over his head like a cloud of insects. It was not until she asked him point blank whether he was listening to her that he began to do so.

"Reservations?" he asked her, in response to her previous statement.

"Yes, to New York. You said that this Christmas we would finally get to see New York. Christmas is only ten days away."

"Ten days," said Petrakov.

"Well, I made our reservations today, for the airplane and for the hotel. By the central park."

"Good."

"You don't sound very pleased."

"I'm sorry, Vera," said Petrakov, putting down his fork. "It's just that I'm very tired. We'll talk about it tomorrow, all right?"

Petrakov spent a sleepless night during which he glanced at the clock almost every thirty minutes until dawn. In the morning he again left the house without waking his wife, and he arrived at the hospital looking even more haggard than the day before. He set about clearing his schedule of work he had not been able to attend to the day before owing to the lengthy postmortem exam of the young woman. But as he inspected the slides on the microscope stage, a largely unremarkable collection of smears and tissue sections, his mind was elsewhere. Though he did not expect the toxicological screens to turn up anything significant, there were a number of questions remaining, questions only Sheriff Pye could answer.

The tox screens, the phone call from the sheriff, and Schiller's arrival all occurred at the same time. Schiller took the call, then stood with the receiver held out impatiently while Petrakov quickly scanned the printout. All the values were within normal limits except for traces of barbiturate in both the stomach and peripheral blood. These traces were consistent with a moderate dose taken

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orally, such as one which might be prescribed for a seizure disorder or insomnia. He tossed the printout on the desk and took the phone from Schiller.

"Petrakov," he said.

"What have you got for me, Doc?" asked Pye.

"I have turned up a few things, but I still have some questions."

"Trouble?"

"Perhaps. Can you come down to the hospital?"

"Sure, give me an hour," said Pye.

"Good. I will see you in an hour then."

Petrakov made a quick call to the mortuary and arranged for the body to be picked up that afternoon. Then he turned to Schiller.

"Did you find anything in Medical Records?"

Schiller fished a piece of paper from her pocket, spilling several lengths of rubber tubing, a tuning fork, and a pocket notebook containing the total sum of medical knowledge onto the floor in the process. As she gathered up these things she read from the paper.

"She was in this hospital for some minor orthopedic surgery on her left foot two years ago, a neuroma. I called her doctor but he was unaware of any history of depression. Although I wouldn't expect an orthopedist to have picked that up anyway, so I don't suppose we can rule it out."

Petrakov sighed.

"Other than that," Schiller continued, "we have no records on her."

"Tell me, did she receive any unusual medications while she was an in-patient?"

"No, just some antibiotics and a mild analgesic."

"Thank you for checking. Did you find your reading in the library helpful?"

"Actually I didn't get the chance. I ran into one of the other students on rotation with the surgeons. He was about to scrub on an aneurysm and he asked if I wanted to scrub in. The surgeons said it was okay, so I spent the afternoon in OR. I hope that was all right."

"Certainly. You are here to learn and free to go anywhere you please," said Petrakov. Then he added, "I expect to be out of the building for most of the afternoon. If you wish to roam the halls in search of other learning experiences, go right ahead."

"All right, if you're sure you don't need me."

"I will manage as best I can."

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Schiller left the room just as the sheriff was entering. His eyes followed her as she went out the door.

"Mornin', Doc," he said, sitting on the edge of the desk.

"Good morning, Sheriff. Thank you for coming."

"Part of the job. What've you got?"

"First I have a few questions. Come," said Petrakov, leading the sheriff over to the drawer containing the body of the young woman.

"Wait a minute," said Pye, blocking the drawer. "She isn't all cut up or anything, is she?"

"Not to worry, Sheriff," said Petrakov, pulling open the drawer. "I just want you to see her feet."

Petrakov pulled back the drape, revealing feet which were now swollen, the two bluish discolorations almost black.

"I looked at these lesions closely for rope fibers or other material, but I found none. Were there any indications that she had been bound?"

"Sorry, Doc, I guess I should have said something. It's her shoes."

Petrakov gave the sheriff a questioning look.

"They were half off her feet when we found her. Strap jobs. Those marks are from the straps."

"I see," said Petrakov, taken aback. "Did you search the apartment thoroughly before you brought her here?"

"We looked the place over, if that's what you mean. Why don't you just tell me what's on your mind."

"You found no syringe?"

"No."

"Then the girl was murdered."

Petrakov spent the next half hour going over his findings with Pye. He showed him the slides of the needle tract and of the microinfarcts in the brain, but he had the feeling such details were lost on the sheriff. He explained the mechanism by which the air embolism had obstructed the flow of blood from the heart, thereby causing the death of the woman. He also tried to explain why he thought suicide was unlikely.

"It all sounds real good, Doc, 'cept for one thing."

"What is that?"

"I don't see as how the girl would've sat still for that injection, do you?" Pye asked smugly.

Petrakov walked over to the desk.

"Here," he said, and he handed the sheriff the toxicology printout, pointing to the barbiturate levels. "These levels reflect the barbitu-

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rate I found in her stomach and blood. Perhaps she was fed the sedative with her last meal, and after she fell asleep she was given the injection."

"Reckon it could have happened that way. Sounds like something out of a goddam book."

"I don't understand."

"Look, Doc, you're not from around here. I don't know how things are back where you come from, but around here we don't have none of this embolism stuff. I mean, a man wants to kill somebody he just hauls off and does it with something normal, know what I mean?"

"Not this time," said Petrakov.

The sheriff handed Petrakov the printout and headed for the door.

"Reckon I got a homicide investigation on my hands."

"Will you let me know what you find out?"

"Sure, Doc, but don't get your hopes up. Probably turn into a whole lot of nothin'."

"I will expect to hear from you then."

" 'Preciate it," said Pye, from the other side of the door.

That afternoon Petrakov took the stomach contents sample he had put aside to the agricultural college on the other side of town. He left it with a Dr. Tilden in the Plant Sciences department and was told he'd be called in a few days with the results. Petrakov doubted the analysis would turn up anything worthwhile.

Over the next few days Petrakov called the sheriff on a daily basis, finding out only that the investigation had resulted in the thorough exploration of a number of dead ends. There were no medications among the effects or in the apartment of the victim. She had no enemies of whom her coworkers were aware. Her girlfriend was unable to add anything to the information she had already supplied, except that she thought the victim was having an affair with a married man. This because the victim, normally quite communicative where her love life was concerned, was uncharacteristically reticent about her current involvement. But the girlfriend had never met the man in question nor had she ever heard his name mentioned.

Meanwhile the day of Petrakov's departure to New York was approaching. Vera Petrakova was busy running around town buying collapsible toothbrushes, toilet article bags, and rolling suitcase holders. She had also bought two new dresses with matching accessories, but Petrakov was unable to register appreciation for any of these accomplishments. The face of the young woman stayed in

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his mind almost all the time, waking or sleeping. The sheriff was becoming openly hostile on the phone and with each rebuff Petrakov was sinking deeper into a morass of fatigue and disillusionment. Somehow the fate of the young woman, the likelihood that her killer would never be found, had come to stand in for the isolation Petrakov had felt since his emigration. In America people lived more or less alone except for superficial attachments to other people and things, a perfect place for an exile, he thought ruefully. His unenthusiastic apprentice, Miss Schiller, was spending less and less time in the pathology department as his own enthusiasm for teaching her waned. Beneath his eyes a second set of dark circles had sprouted and his dyspepsia was worse than ever.

At two o'clock in the afternoon on the day of his departure, as he prepared to leave the lab to pick up his wife for the drive to the airport, the phone rang. In the midst of his dejection Petrakov had forgotten about the specimen he had dropped off with Dr. Tilden. Over the phone Tilden gave him a breakdown of the analysis which Petrakov transcribed onto the back of a lab slip. He glanced at the list; the ingredients of the victim's last meal struck him as exotic given the monotonous cuisine of the subculture in which he was now living, but in no way did it plug into the investigation. Petrakov shoved the list into his pocket and headed for home.

He picked up his wife and left for the airport, moving like an automaton. Though they had left with plenty of time to spare, Petrakov managed to get lost at the airport and ended up parking almost a mile from the terminal. As they hurried in and out of the traffic, Vera Petrakova in the lead chattering and clutching visas, birth certificates, and diplomas without which she had refused to leave, Petrakov lagged behind dragging the rolling suitcase holder. In the terminal, while his wife twisted and untwisted the sheaf of papers in her hands, Petrakov bought a cup of ersatz coffee and made one last call to the sheriff. He was listening to the sheriff lecture him on Petrakov's unsuitability for the role of detective for perhaps the third time when he was startled by the sight of a panicky face pressed up against the glass of the phone booth. Their plane had been called and Vera Petrakova was frantically trying to get him to hang up the phone.

As the airplane approached New York the sun was setting and Vera Petrakova had her face glued to the window. The city glittered like a huge palace, and when she turned from the window to squeeze Petrakov's hand her face was wet with tears.

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Their days in New York, where Christmas was a milky gray if not precisely white, passed, for Petrakov, like a somnambulist's nocturnal excursion: he was dragged up and down the streets, from one end of Manhattan to the other, in his wife's wake. Vera Petrakova cried when they arrived at the hotel and again up in the room. She cried as they stared into the phantasmagoric window of FAO Schwarz. She cried at the sight of the gigantic Christmas tree and the weightless skaters of Rockefeller Center, and she cried at their table in the Tavern on the Green. In short, she had the time of her life.

Petrakov accompanied his wife everywhere. She stopped frequently to look through the pristine store windows at a profusion of merchandise which constituted, for her, an earthly paradise. While she did so Petrakov squinted morosely at the pedestrian traffic, occasionally lifting his gaze to follow a bit of paper caught in an updraft or a soot-colored pigeon finding its perch on an overhanging cornice. The women were long-legged and thin, made up to resemble the mannequins in the store windows. Each one looked more or less like the murder victim.

He was struck by the extraordinary number of homeless people, many sleeping on subway grates, others sitting numbly in the slush, crudely lettered pieces of cardboard clutched to their chests. In contrast to these sorrowful souls were the passersby, striding purposefully around the prostrate, looking neither right nor left. Occasionally a clot of schoolchildren were dragged along by their chaperones, their eyes and mouths wide open. To Petrakov, all this looked like a society in decline. What have I gotten myself into? he thought.

As they left the hotel room on their last day in the city, Petrakov was wearing the coat he had worn when he had last been in the lab. He checked his pocket for his room key and found the slip on the back of which he had written the contents of Dr. Tilden's analysis. Waiting for the elevator, he glanced at the list:

grape leaves
Greek olives
mint
dill weed
rice, processed
cayenne peppers

When they hit the street Petrakov checked the storefronts for a bookshop. They entered one on Fifth Avenue and Petrakov left his

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wife at a display of large-format art books while he looked for the cookbook section. When he found it he pulled an encyclopedic tome from the shelf and checked under "grape leaves." Leafing through the section on Greek cuisine, he found a recipe for Dolmasi which contained all of the items on his list.

On the plane ride home it was Petrakov who stared out of the window, watching the city recede in the twilight. Vera Petrakova slept all the way, occasionally mumbling unintelligibly in her sleep.

The next day Petrakov returned to the lab. Except for the pile-up of work that awaited him, it seemed as though he had never been away. The dark cloud that hung over his head was still there, but he resisted calling the sheriff, unwilling to subject himself to another lecture. He worked listlessly through the day, accomplishing little. On his way home that evening he drove by the fitness club, slowing down as he passed it. Women came and went through the glass double-doors, their colorful plumage standing out against the gray light of the winter evening. He wondered if any of them had known the victim.

Over dinner with his wife, Petrakov learned that they were expected at a dinner for new members of the hospital staff at the end of the week.

"I don't want to go, Vera," he said.

"I can't go by myself, Ilie. What will people think?"

"Then don't go."

"You need to socialize more. You can't spend all your time with the dead."

"They are better company."

"In America people who don't socialize are thought of as misfits."

"Maybe I'm a misfit."

"Ilie," said Vera Petrakova in a hurt tone.

"All right, Vera, we'll go to this dinner and you'll see. We'll stick out like a pair of goats at a cow convention."

In addition to his other work, Petrakov was saddled during the week with Schiller's replacement, a tall, skinny young man who immediately declared himself to be "ready, willing, and able," and who demonstrated the dexterity of a lobster. I'm going nowhere, Petrakov thought to himself.

The dinner that Friday evening was held in the home of a husband and wife doctor team; he, Dr. Halliday, an internist, his wife, also Dr. Halliday, a dermatologist. The house was filled with the accoutrements found in the homes of people with lots of money and little

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taste: copies of classical statuary made from the same material used in brake linings, paintings chosen for their compatibility with the rugs and upholstery, and the like. There were about twenty people in attendance, not quite enough of a crowd to get lost in. Dr. Petrakov and his wife were taken in hand by the host and introduced to everyone at least twice, which succeeded only in making them feel even more ill at ease. At some point in the evening Petrakov was separated from his wife and ushered over to the buffet table by Dr. Halliday, the dermatologist.

"I haven't seen you eat anything, Dr. Petrakov. Won't you try something?"

"Actually I'm not very hungry. I ate something before we left the house," he lied.

"Here," she said, ignoring his answer. "I made this myself, so I know it's good."

The dish was unfamiliar to Petrakov, but he felt obliged to try it. As he swallowed his first mouthful he asked his hostess what it was.

"Dolmasi," she said. "My mother was Greek, I grew up on this stuff."

Petrakov put a napkin to his mouth and quickly reached for a plastic cup of club soda.

"Is there anything wrong?"

"No, it's very good," said Petrakov. "Excuse me, I'll bring some of this to my wife."

Petrakov stayed at the party until he could convince Vera Petrakova to leave, making small talk with the other doctors and their wives when he had to and avoiding the host and hostess. All through the evening, and at home as he tried unsuccessfully to fall asleep, he attempted to construct a set of circumstances linking the good Doctors Halliday to the victim, via Dolmasi. By dawn he had one.

When Sheriff Pye got to his office that morning he found Petrakov waiting for him.

"Now, look, Doc," said Pye before Petrakov could speak, but Petrakov interrupted him.

"May I see you in your office?"

"All right, seein' as you're here already."

Once inside the sheriff's office Petrakov told him of the lab analysis of the stomach contents of the young woman, reminded him of the girlfriend's statement that an affair with a married man may have been going on, and of his discovery at the dinner party. He

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suggested that Pye obtain pictures of both the Hallidays and show them around the fitness club.

"I'll tell you what. Seein' as how we got to work together now and again, I'll go with you on this one more time. But you got to promise me, after this, if nothin' turns up you'll leave it alone."

"You have my word," said Petrakov, getting up to leave.

"And one more thing. Don't call me, Doc, I'll call you."

Petrakov waved his hand without turning around and left the office.

Two days later he arrived at the lab to find that Pye had returned the visit.

"Mornin', Doc."

"What have you found?" asked Petrakov.

"Can we go inside?" asked Pye politely.

Pye ran down the events of the previous two days. He described showing the photos around the fitness club; no one had seen the husband, but most of the people working at the club knew the wife immediately. Apparently she had joined the club a couple of months before, but under an assumed name—no one there knew she was a doctor. She had become friendly with the victim, going so far as to schedule her exercise hour around the time the victim came to work. The receptionist on the shift before the victim's now thought she remembered the victim saying she was meeting one of the club's patrons for dinner on the night she died.

After his first conversation with Petrakov, when Petrakov had told him about the air embolism, Pye had dusted the victim's apartment for fingerprints and had found a set of prints on the doorknob which did not match those of the victim's. They belonged to the good doctor.

"The way I see it, Doc, Mrs. Halliday got wind of her husband's runnin' around behind her back. She found out who the girl was, got next to her, and met her for dinner at the girl's apartment on the night of the murder. She got the barbiturate in her, probably in that dish you spotted, then gave her the shot. It's a lucky thing she wasn't a pro or anything. If she'd worn gloves, we wouldn't have those prints. But we do, and I reckon that'll be enough for the D.A."

"Excellent," said Petrakov.

The sheriff adjusted his hat, his belt, his gun, then cleared his throat.

"Nice place you have here," he said awkwardly.

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"Would you like some coffee?" asked Petrakov, trying to let him off the hook.

"No, thanks just the same. I got to be gettin' back. Just wanted to let you know how things worked out," said the sheriff, his hand on the door.

" 'Preciate it," said Petrakov, smiling.

Petrakov spent the rest of the day getting lighter and lighter, until by ten o'clock that night, when he had at last caught up with his work, he felt as weightless as the skaters at Rockefeller Center. When he got home Vera Petrakova was awake but already in bed.

"Do you believe it?" she asked, when Petrakov had crawled into bed beside her. "Dr. Miller's wife called me today to say that Mrs. Dr. Halliday, from the dinner party, was arrested last night. For murder!"

Petrakov's eyes were closed. The image of the young woman's face was gone; it had been replaced by his wife's, her eyes sparkling beneath the overhead light of the airplane as it had entered the mesmerizing New York night.

"In America, Vera, anything is possible."

"You got that right, buddy," said Vera Petrakova, beginning to laugh even before she had gotten the rehearsed words out. And they laughed together far into the night.

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Recent years have seen a proliferation of awards in the mystery genre. The Mystery Writers of America's venerable Edgar Allan Poe Awards will be presented for the fiftieth time this spring. The first book to win an Edgar was Julius Fast's *Watchful at Night,* adjudged the best first mystery of 1945. (The author, the brother of Howard Fast, would become better known years later for the non-fiction bestseller *Body Language.)* The British Crime Writers Association's Dagger Awards came along ten years later. In the past few years, these have been joined by the Agatha (given at the annual Malice Domestic convention), Anthony (presented at the annual Anthony Boucher Memorial Mystery Convention, or Bouchercon), Shamus (awarded by the Private Eye Writers of America), Macavity (Mystery Readers International), Arthur Ellis (Crime Writers of Canada), Hammett Prize (North American Branch of the International Association of Crime Writers), and American Mystery Awards *(Mystery Scene* magazine). As the Edgars and Agathas prepare to kick off the awards season in May 1995, let's take one last look at some of the best of 1994 not previously reviewed in this space, beginning with the latest from four past winners of the best-novel Edgar.

**** Lawrence Block, *A Long Line of Dead Men,* Morrow, $20. Unlicensed New York private eye Matt Scudder is consulted by a member of a "last man" club whose members are dying off at an alarmingly accelerated pace. The investigation is fascinating, and the sidebar discourses on death and alcoholism are less tangential to the story than they may at first seem. Block, who was named an M.W.A. Grand Master in 1994 while also picking up the best-short-story Edgar, won the best-novel award for an earlier Scudder novel, *A Dance at the Slaughterhouse* (1991). He has achieved the kind of stature that permits him to experiment with the mystery form in ways less secure performers would not dare.

**** Dick Francis: *Wild Horses,* Putnam, $22.95. There's a tendency to take the perpetually best-selling Francis, a double Edgar winner for *Forfeit* (1969) and *Whiphand* (1980), for granted these days, but he's operating at as high a level of craft as ever—and possibly an even higher level of character insight. The hero this time is Thomas Lyon, one-time amateur steeplechase jockey turned film director, who decides he must solve a years-old Newmarket murder case in order to make his latest feature a success. As always, the specialized detail is fas-

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cinating, and the dovetailing of plot and theme in the final pages demonstrates how complete is Francis's mastery of crime writing technique.

*** Minette Walters: *The Scold's Bridle,* St. Martin's, $21.95. The author of the 1993 Edgar winner, *The Sculptress,* returns with a complexly plotted and intriguingly peopled English village whodunit. When the elderly and widely hated Mathilda Gillespie is found murdered in her bathtub, the titular torture instrument over her head, Dr. Sarah Blakeney becomes involved in her patient's life and death in ways she never imagined. The somewhat elongated exposition of the final chapters keeps me from putting Walters in the P.D. James/Ruth Rendell class on the basis of this one, but she is clearly a writer of notable skill and talent.

*** Julie Smith: *New Orleans Beat,* Fawcett Columbine, $21.50. Smith often illuminates a relatively fresh subculture in her novels about New Orleans cop Skip Langdon. This time, it's the world of computer bulletin boards, whose users often share intimate secrets and usually never meet face to face. The background is effectively exploited and the characters and plot are typically well-wrought. If this is not up to earlier Langdon novels, including the Edgar-winning *New Orleans Mourning* (1990), excessive length is part of the problem. While I am not one of those readers who automatically resent the intrusion of a sleuth's personal life, in this case Skip's romantic entanglements serve to slow down the story.

*** Janwillem van de Wetering: *Just a Corpse at Twilight,* Soho, $20. Dust off the comeback-of-the-year award for the first Grijpstra & De Gier mystery in eight years. Both are now retired from the Amsterdam police. Grijpstra, now a private detective, travels to Maine, where his ex-partner is accused of murder. The Commissaris, also retired and ailing, is in action back in Holland as an armchair (or more accurately bathtub) detective. Van de Wetering is one of the most individual stylists in the field, with a whimsical world view and a knack for off-center characters—if you enjoyed him before, you will again, and I'm sure the reverse is equally true.

*** H.R.F. Keating: *Doing Wrong,* Penzler, $20. Due to a glitch in trans-Atlantic publishing schedules, this is the second Inspector Ghote novel of the year for American readers. One reason the series never loses its appeal is its variety. Though the style, the central character, and the semi-comic dialogue, strewn with *only*s and *itself*s, remains constant, the moods, themes, and structures change from book to book. This time it's an inverted detective novel, as Ghote jousts Columbo-style with H.K. Verma, a killer known to the reader from the beginning. The setting is the holy city of Banares. Reminding me of experimentalist playwright Alan Ayckbourn, Keating includes one scene twice, first from Ghote's viewpoint and then from his quarry's, but I'm not sure

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the two treatments are different enough for full success.

*** C.L. Grace: *The Eye of God,* St. Martin's, $18.95. The staggeringly prolific P.C. Doherty, who has appeared in the past year under his own name and at least three (and I suspect more) pseudonyms, here presents the second novel about fifteenth-century Canterbury physician Kathryn Swinbrooke. There's another example of the author's impossible-crime specialty—for at least the third time under as many bylines, a victim falls (or is pushed) from a great height with no apparent assailant in sight—and another complex and finely-tuned puzzle plot, plus rich historical detail, including this time the day to day practice of medieval medicine.

The latest reprint in the Armchair Detective Library, Ed McBain's 1958 87th Precinct novel *Lady Killer* (Penzler, $22), has an unusually interesting new introduction about the circumstances of writing the book and an anecdote involving novelist Sloan Wilson and a shark. Carroll & Graf continue their reprinting of John Dickson Carr's historical detective novels with *Fire, Burn* ($4.50), a time travel fantasy opening with a tantalizing Jack Finney-type situation: A Scotland Yard detective enters a cab in the 1950s and emerges in the London of 1829.

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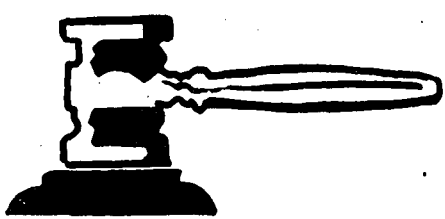

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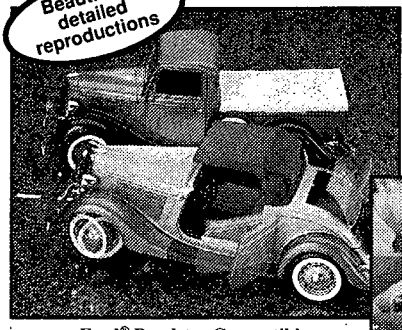

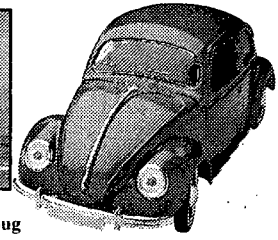

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Dr. Sam Hawthorne is a figure, like nearly all amateur sleuths, in whom people like to confide. A country doctor in the 1930s, after all, was a person the community had to learn to trust, and who might well be invited to serve on civic committees. In the following outing for the good doctor, detection centers around his membership on the cemetery board . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE CROWDED CEMETERY

by EDWARD D. HOCH

I used to picnic in Spring Glen Cemetery in my younger days (Dr. Sam Hawthorne told his visitor over a suitable libation). That was when the place was more like a park than a cemetery, bisected by a creek that flowed gently through it most of the year. It was only in the spring, with the snow melting on Cobble Mountain, that the creek sometimes overflowed and flooded part of the graveyard.

That was what happened following the especially harsh winter of '36. The flooded creek had so eroded the soil on its banks that several acres of cemetery land had been lost. I was a member of the cemetery's board of trustees at that time and when we met in the spring of 1939 it was obvious something had to be done.

"It's just been getting worse for the past three years," Dalton Swan was saying as he showed us photographs of the damage done by the flooded stream. He was the tall, balding president of the board, a rotating responsibility each of the five members had assumed at one time or another. Swan, a fiftyish bank president, was in the second year of his two-year term.

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I shuffled the pictures in my hands before passing them to Virginia Taylor on my right. Aware of the cemetery's shaky financial underpinnings, I asked, "Couldn't this go another year?"

"Look at these pictures, Sam," Dalton Swan argued. "The Brewster family gravesite is almost washed away! Here, you can actually see the corner of a coffin among these tree roots."

"Those coffins need to be dug up and moved," Virginia Taylor agreed. She was a tall, athletic woman in her thirties whom I often glimpsed on the tennis courts around town. The Taylor family had made their money growing tobacco all over the state of Connecticut but all it had earned them was the largest family plot in Spring Glen Cemetery.

We discussed it awhile longer, with Randy Freed, a trustee and the cemetery's legal counsel, suggesting we give it another month. "We simply can't justify this expense if there's another way out."

Dalton Swan scoffed at that. "The only other way is to let the Brewster coffins float down Spring Glen Creek. That what you want?"

Freed bristled, more at Swan's tone of voice than at the words. "Do what you want," he grumbled.

Swan called for a vote on the motion to move the endangered coffins. "I've already spoken with the Brewster family. They'll sign the necessary papers."

Miss Taylor, Swan, and I voted yes, along with Hiram Mullins, a retired real-estate developer who rarely spoke at our meetings. He sat there now with a sad smile on his face, perhaps remembering better days when creeks did not overflow their banks. The only negative vote came from Randy Freed.

"We'll proceed, then, as quickly as possible," Dalton Swan said. "Gunther can have the workmen and equipment here in the morning." Earl Gunther was the cemetery's superintendent, in charge of its day-to-day operation.

"You're making a mistake rushing into it like this," Freed told us. "A truckload of dirt tamped down along the bank of the creek would be a lot easier than relocating those coffins."

"Until it washed away with the next heavy rain," Swan argued. "Be practical, for God's sake!"

It did seem to me that the lawyer was being a bit unreasonable and I wondered why. "If it'll help matters any," I volunteered, "I can be out here in the morning when the workmen arrive, just to make certain nothing is touched but the Brewster plot."

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"That would help a great deal, Dr. Hawthorne," Virginia Taylor agreed. "We'd all feel better if there was some supervision on this besides Earl Gunther."

The superintendent had not been a special favorite of the trustees since a pair of his day laborers had been found drunk one morning, finishing off a quart of rye whiskey on the back of a toppled tombstone. Sheriff Lens had been called by some horrified mourners and he'd given the two a choice of thirty days in jail or a quick trip out of town. They'd chosen the latter, but the matter had come to the board's attention. Earl Gunther had been warned to stay on top of things if he wanted to keep his job.

After the meeting we sought him out in the house near the cemetery gate. It went with the job, though his office was in the building where we met. Earl's wife Linda ushered us in. "Dear, Dr. Hawthorne and Mr. Swan are here to see you."

Earl Gunther was a burly man with a black moustache and thinning hair. He'd been a gravedigger at Spring Glen for years before taking on the job of superintendent. None of the board had been too excited at the prospect, but he seemed to be the best man available. He was newly married to Linda at the time and somehow we felt she might help straighten him out. She had, but not quite enough.

The Spring Glen board of trustees only met quarterly. This April meeting would be our last till the traditional July outing at Dalton Swan's farm. It wasn't something that took a great deal of my time, and until now it had never involved anything other than the perfunctory board meetings. All that was about to change. "Dr. Hawthorne will be out in the morning to oversee the disinterment and reburial," Swan told the superintendent. "We don't foresee any problem."

Earl Gunther rubbed his chin. "I'll get a crew lined up, with shovels and a block and tackle. There are six coffins in the Brewster plot. That's gonna be an all-day job."

"It can't be helped. Someone from the family will be here for the reburial, probably with the minister."

"We'll do the best we can," the superintendent informed us.

Dalton Swan nodded. "I'm sure you will."

I drove back to the office where I had a couple of early afternoon appointments. "Any excitement at the meeting?" Mary Best asked, knowing there never was.

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"Nothing much. I have to go out there in the morning while they move the Brewster plot. The creek's just eating away at the banks."

She glanced at my appointment book. "Shall I reschedule Mrs. Winston for the afternoon?"

"Better make it Friday morning if you can. There's no telling how long I'll be out there."

While I waited for my first patient I glanced at the newspaper headlines. Hitler was insisting on the return of Danzig and a war between Germany and Poland seemed a distinct possibility. Up here in Northmont such concerns were still far away.

Late that afternoon, as I was leaving my office, I saw Virginia Taylor coming out of the adjoining Pilgrim Memorial Hospital. She paused by her car, waiting till I reached her. "Will you be at Spring Glen in the morning?"

"I'm planning on it."

"That's good. The Brewster family is very concerned that the remains be moved in a dignified manner."

"I'm sure there'll be no problems. Whatever his other faults, Gunther is a good worker."

She nodded and motioned back toward the hospital building. "I do some volunteer work here on Tuesdays. It makes for a full day when there's also a board meeting." She belonged to one of Northmont's older families and spent much of her time with charitable causes. A few years back she'd been engaged to a young lawyer from Providence but they'd broken up, leaving her still unmarried. As often happened with unmarried women, her tennis and travel and volunteer work had managed to fill her life. The family tobacco business had long since been sold to others.

We chatted awhile longer and then she went off in the sporty little convertible she drove around town. I'd had a car something like it in my younger days.

In the morning I drove out to the cemetery, arriving before nine. Earl Gunther had a flatbed truck parked by the Brewster plot, its back loaded with shovels and picks, a block and tackle, and a bulky tarpaulin folded into a heap. A half-dozen workmen were just arriving on the scene, walking over from the main gate.

"Good to see you, Doc," Gunther greeted me with a handshake. "I'm using two crews of three men each. One will work on the creek side, digging into the bank. The other will dig in from the top to reach the other coffins. It'll probably take all morning and maybe longer."

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I watched the crew by the creek as they shoveled away the soft dirt and cut through some of the tree roots with axes. The tombstones up above told me that the most recent of these graves was over fifteen years old, and a couple dated back to before the turn of the century. As one coffin finally came free an hour later the workmen hoisted it out with the block and tackle, guiding it onto the flatbed truck. After that the pace seemed to pick up. Before I knew it a second and third coffin had appeared on the flatbed, with a fourth being lifted from its resting place.

I'd wandered around the cemetery while the work was in progress, reading the names off the tombstones, remembering a few old patients whose lives I'd briefly prolonged. Finally, around noon, the last of the six coffins was pulled free of the tough oak roots that encircled it. I walked over to the truck as it was slid into place.

"Good work, Earl," I told him. "It looks like just one or two of the corners were damaged." These burials had been in the days before coffins were enclosed in metal vaults, and the older ones were showing evidence of their decades in the earth, even before the recent ravages of the flooded creek. Still, all six seemed to be reasonably sound. Or at least I thought so before my probing fingers encountered something wet and sticky at the damaged corner of one coffin.

"What's this?" I asked Gunther. My hand had come away moistened by blood and for a moment I thought I'd cut myself.

"You bleeding?"

"I'm not, but this coffin is."

"Coffins don't bleed, Doc, especially after twenty or thirty years."

"I think we better open this one up." The lid was still firmly screwed down and my fingers were useless. "Do you have a tool of some sort?"

"It's just bones," the superintendent argued.

"We'd better have a look."

He sighed and went to get some tools. The lid was unscrewed and easily pried open. I lifted it myself, prepared for the sight of decay. I wasn't prepared for the bloody corpse that confronted me, jammed in on top of the stark white bones.

Impossibly, irrationally, it was the body of Hiram Mullins, who'd sat next to me at the board meeting not twenty-four hours earlier.

It was Sheriff Lens who offered the best commentary when he arrived to view the body less than an hour later. "You've really outdone yourself this time, Doc. How could a man who was alive

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yesterday end up murdered inside a coffin that's been buried for twenty years?"

"I don't know, Sheriff, but I damn well intend to find out." I'd been questioning Earl Gunther and the workmen while we waited for the sheriff's arrival, but they professed to know nothing. Earl seemed especially upset, nervously wiping the sweat from his brow though the temperature was barely sixty.

"How's the board goin' to react to this, Doc? Will I lose my job?"

"Not if we can show you weren't responsible. But you have to be completely honest with me, Earl. Had any of those graves been dug up during the night?"

"You saw the ground yourself, Doc, before they started digging. It hadn't been touched in years. There's no way a coffin could have been dug up and reburied without leaving traces."

"Did you know Hiram Mullins well?"

"Hardly at all. I saw him when he came to your board meetings, that was it. He seemed like a nice man. Never said much."

That was certainly true, and I used virtually the same words to describe Mullins to the sheriff when he arrived. Sheriff Lens peered distastefully at the body in the coffin and asked, "What do you think caused the wound?"

"Some sharp instrument like a knife, only the blade seems to have been longer and thicker. There's a great deal of chest damage and so much blood that it actually leaked out of this rotted corner of the coffin."

"Good thing it did, or the Brewsters would have been reburied and Mullins along with them." The sheriff had brought a camera with him and was taking some photographs of the crime scene. He'd been doing this recently, following techniques outlined in crime investigation handbooks. He might have been a small-town sheriff but he was willing to learn new things. "What do you know about Mullins?"

I shrugged. "No more than you, I imagine. He was around seventy, I suppose, retired from his own real-estate business. I never saw him except at the cemetery board meetings, every three months."

"His wife is dead and they had no children," the sheriff said. "But how do you think he got into that coffin, Doc?"

"I have no idea."

When I got back to my office I looked through my bookshelves until I found an Ellery Queen mystery I remembered from seven years earlier. It was called *The Greek Coffin Mystery* and it dealt

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with two bodies discovered in a single coffin. But the second body had been added before the original burial. It didn't help a bit with Hiram Mullins's killing. His body had been added to a coffin already buried for two decades.

Before long my telephone started ringing. The word was getting around. First to call was Randy Freed, the lawyer who served as legal counsel for Spring Glen. "Sam, what's this I hear about old Mullins?"

"It's true. We found his body in one of the coffins Gunther's crew dug up."

"How is that possible?"

"It's not."

"Look here, Sam—you're the last one I'd expect to believe in any sort of supernatural business. Maybe Earl Gunther's crew added the body after they dug up the coffin."

"I was there all the time, Randy, never more than a hundred feet away."

"Do you think Spring Glen could face any sort of liability from the Mullins family?"

"I don't know how much of a family there is, and he was clearly murdered. We just have to figure out how."

"I'll be in touch," Freed told me as he hung up.

The next call came from Dalton Swan, advising me that he was calling an emergency meeting of the cemetery board for the following day. "We have to get to the bottom of this. The board has to issue a statement of some sort and we have to pick someone to fill his place."

The latter didn't seem that urgent to me, since we only met quarterly. "Whatever you say, Dalton. I have some hospital visits in the morning but after that I'm free till afternoon."

"Let's say eleven o'clock, then. I've spoken with Virginia and that time is good for her."

"Fine."

Mary Best came in as I hung up, returning from a late lunch. "What's this business of two bodies in one coffin?" she asked immediately. "Is Spring Glen getting that crowded?"

"I suppose the news is all over town."

She sat down at her reception desk. "All I know is, it's another impossible murder with you right in the center of things again."

"Believe me, I didn't plan it that way. Until now, being a cemetery trustee was about the easiest position I ever held."

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"The creek's the problem there. Maybe they should have gone in with Shinn Corners after all." The nearby town had wanted to develop a new regional cemetery serving both communities, but before anything could be decided the land was sold to a private college now under construction for a September opening.

"I never knew a thing about that till it was over," I admitted. "I don't know that anyone on the board did."

Mary had a way of thinking things through to their basics. "Would Earl Gunther have any reason for killing Mullins?" she asked.

"I can't imagine what it would be. The old man just sat there at the meetings, never said a word about Gunther or anyone else."

"Still, you don't think Gunther could be involved?"

"Maybe. But I don't picture Mullins going out to the cemetery to meet him at the crack of dawn. And even if he did, how would Gunther have gotten the body into a coffin buried six feet deep in firm, undisturbed earth?"

"Let me think about that while I type up the bills," she said. Mary was never one to admit defeat.

I waited around the hospital that afternoon until Doc Prouty completed the autopsy on old Hiram. There were no surprises. "Fully dressed except for collar and tie," he said as he washed up in the autopsy room. "It was a large, deep wound that encompassed the chest and heart. Went in under the rib cage, slanting up."

"What could make a wound like that? A broadsword?"

He chuckled. "Northmont isn't quite that far behind the times. There must be a lot of gardening tools around at the cemetery. I suppose a hedge trimmer could have done it."

"Can you estimate the time of death?"

"He'd eaten breakfast maybe an hour before he died."

"Breakfast?"

"Looks like toast and scrambled eggs."

"I was out there before nine."

A shrug. "People the age of Mullins, living alone, sometimes eat breakfast at four in the morning. I'd say he could have been killed anywhere between five and nine A.M., judging by the body temperature and such."

"Thanks, Doc."

I was halfway out the door when he said, "One more thing."

"What's that?"

"With a wound like this, there's no way the killer could have moved the body without getting blood on his clothes."

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* * *

I phoned Sheriff Lens with the advance word on the autopsy results. I also told him about the blood. "Didn't notice blood on Gunther or any of his workmen," was his comment.

"Of course not. The killing couldn't have happened while I was there."

"Hiram Mullins drove a fancy Lincoln. Had one long as I can remember. We found it parked in his driveway."

"Well?"

"How'd he get out to the cemetery, Doc? He sure didn't walk at his age. Not in the dark."

It was only a couple of miles, and certainly walkable, but I admitted it was unlikely for someone like Mullins. That meant he'd probably been driven to the spot by his killer. It had been someone he knew and trusted to get him out that early in the morning. Would Earl Gunther have called him? One of the board members?

I finished talking to the sheriff and told Mary she could go home. I stayed awhile longer, puzzling over the life and death of a man I'd barely known, a silent man I'd seen four times a year and barely nodded to. I wondered if that ignorance was his fault or mine.

"Dr. Hawthorne?"

I looked up at the sound of my name and saw a young woman standing in the doorway. The light from the hall was at her back and it took me an instant to recognize Linda Gunther, Earl's wife. "Can I help you?" I asked, certain the reason for her visit must be medical.

"I just wanted to speak with you about Earl, and about what happened this morning. I hear there's a meeting—"

"Sit down. I was just closing for the day."

"I know my husband has been in trouble with the cemetery board before. He was worried about losing his job. Now, with what happened this morning, he's afraid of being arrested."

"We have no reason to believe Earl is implicated in the killing. I was there the whole time the coffins were being disinterred. If he'd done anything unusual, I'd have noticed."

"But some of the others have never liked him."

"I don't know that that's true. He's always done his job."

"Is there anything I can do to help him?"

"Just tell the truth if Sheriff Lens has any questions. Did anything unusual happen this morning, for instance?"

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"Nothing. Earl got up around seven and I fixed him breakfast. Then he walked over to the Brewster gravesite."

"What did you two have for breakfast?"

"Juice, cereal, toast, coffee. He has the same thing every morning."

"No eggs?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondered. You didn't hear any unusual noises during the night or early morning?"

"No. Should I have?"

"If Hiram Mullins was murdered in the cemetery he might have screamed or cried out."

"We didn't hear anything."

I remembered what Doc Prouty had said about the blood. "What was your husband wearing when he went out?"

"His work overalls, like always."

"Did he have more than one pair?"

"He keeps an extra down at the tool shed."

I tried to reassure her. "Don't worry, Mrs. Gunther. We're having a special meeting of the cemetery board in the morning, but it's not to take any action against your husband. We'll be talking about a replacement for Mullins."

"And Earl—?"

"—has nothing to worry about if he isn't involved in the killing. He won't be blamed just because it happened in the cemetery."

Linda Gunther allowed herself a cautious smile. "Thank you, Dr. Hawthorne. I appreciate that."

After she'd gone I decided for the first time that she was a fairly attractive woman. Surely she could have done better than Earl Gunther for a husband, but then the ways of love and marriage are sometimes strange.

I had two hospital patients to visit in the morning, both recovering nicely from mild heart attacks. Then I checked in with Mary at the office and told her I'd be driving out to the cemetery for the board meeting. "I thought that wasn't till eleven o'clock," she said.

"I want to get there early and nose around, especially in the tool shed."

"Do you know how it was done?"

"Pure magic," I told her with a grin.

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When I arrived at Spring Glen the morning sun was filtering through the spring leaves, bathing the place in a soft, inviting glow. I was an hour early for the meeting and I was surprised to find I wasn't the first to arrive. Virginia Taylor's sporty convertible occupied one of the parking spaces, though she was nowhere in sight.

I avoided the red-brick superintendent's house where Gunther and his wife lived and headed down the gently curving road toward the tool shed. Off in the distance I could see a couple of workmen removing some limbs from a tree ravaged by winter storms. The shed was unlocked, as it usually was when there were workmen about. I searched around among the tools for Earl's extra pair of overalls but found nothing.

Just as I was about to give up my search I spotted a large pair of hedge trimmers that seemed to be hiding behind a piece of canvas. I pulled them out, not thinking about fingerprints, and examined the blades for bloodstains. They appeared to have been wiped clean, but near the juncture of the blades were rust-colored spots that would be worth examining. I wrapped them in an oily cloth, trying not to damage fingerprints any more than I already had.

I was leaving the shed with my find when I saw Virginia Taylor walking toward me. "What have you got there?"

"Hedge trimmers. Could be the murder weapon."

"I always forget that you're something of a detective."

"Just an amateur."

"I wanted to see the spot where Hiram's body was found," she explained. "They seem to have removed all the Brewster coffins now."

"Did you know Hiram well? I only saw him at the meetings."

"He handled some real-estate transactions for my family years ago. He was good at making deals."

"A man of few words."

She smiled. "He could keep his mouth shut. Sometimes that's a valuable asset."

"Did he still work?"

She shook her head. "He's been retired for a year or so, ever since he put together the parcels of land for the new college in Shinn Corners."

"He was probably an interesting man. I'm sorry I never got to know him better. I remember last summer's party at Swan's place. Even out there I never saw him without a stiff collar and tie." It was still the era of highly starched detachable collars and men like

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Mullins and Swan wore them regularly. I preferred a shirt with an attached collar, as did younger men like Randy Freed.

We strolled back toward the small office building where the board held its meetings. A part-time secretary helped Gunther with the bookwork when she was needed, but most days he was there alone unless he was supervising a work crew. Today, as always, he gathered up his papers to leave us in privacy.

"Stay a few minutes, Earl," I suggested. "We'll want to talk with you about what happened."

"Sure, whatever you say." He stayed at his desk rather than join us at the board table. Almost at once two more cars pulled up outside and I saw that Swan and Freed were arriving.

The lawyer was first through the door, all business. "We've got a serious problem here, Gunther. I'm worried about the cemetery's liability."

Dalton Swan took his seat at the head of the table, running a hand through his thinning hair. "We'll get to that later, Randy. Let's everyone sit down and go over what we know. Have you been able to learn anything, Sam?"

"Not much," I admitted. I ran through the autopsy report for them and then turned to Gunther. "Earl, you usually keep a clean set of overalls in the tool shed, don't you?"

"That's right."

"I was just looking for them. They're not to be found. I did find this hedge trimmer, though, with what looks like traces of blood."

Virginia Taylor made a face. "Sam thinks it could be the murder weapon."

"It's possible."

Dalton Swan now shifted his gaze to the cemetery superintendent. "Isn't that tool shed kept locked, Earl?"

"Sure, most of the time."

"Was it locked night before last?"

"Well—" Gunther looked uneasy. "See, we had all this work to do in the morning, digging up those coffins for reburial. I thought some of the workmen might arrive early so I left the shed unlocked for them. Nobody dug up the graves before we got there, though. Doc saw that for himself."

"That's right," I agreed reluctantly. "The coffins were still underground when I got there."

"Do you have any idea how Mullins's body could have gotten in there?" Swan asked.

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"None. It's like a miracle."

"All right." Swan waved him away. "Leave us alone for a few minutes."

Earl left the office and walked across the driveway to his house.

"Who do you have in mind as Hiram's replacement?" Virginia asked.

It was Randy Freed who answered. "I spoke to Dalton on the phone and made a suggestion. Milton Doyle is—"

"Not another lawyer!" Virginia exploded. "Cemeteries are about families, not lawsuits, for God's sake! How about another woman?"

"We have a woman," Swan answered quietly.

"Then how about *two* women? You men could still outvote us."

"It's worth considering," I agreed. "I suggest we adjourn until after the funeral. In the meantime maybe we can come up with some good women nominees."

Virginia Taylor gave me a smile of thanks and Swan agreed to adjourn until the following Monday. As we were leaving, Freed said, "It doesn't seem the same without old Mullins."

"He never said anything."

"But he was there, right in that chair! With those popping eyes and that bull neck he always looked as if his collar was strangling him."

Something occurred to me. "Randy, where would the records of real-estate transactions for the new college be kept?"

"Shinn Corners. At the courthouse."

It was just a hunch, but it was worth a drive to Shinn Corners. On the way over I started putting the pieces together in my mind. There was a way it could have been done. I saw it clearly now. Sometimes killers set out to create impossible situations but that hadn't been the case here. The killer had only wanted a safe way to dispose of the body, a way that would keep it hidden for another twenty years.

The courthouse was a big old building dating from the turn of the century with a stone fence already grown dark and weathered. In a big room I found maps and deeds, records stretching back a hundred years and longer. A girl in her late teens, a part-time clerk, came to my assistance at once. "The new college? We're very excited about it. I'm already enrolled for September."

"That's great," I said, meaning it. "I need to see the deeds on the various pieces of property that make up the college land. Would that be difficult?"

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"No, not at all. It's a matter of public record."

There were so many individual parcels of land involved that the task seemed hopeless at first. Then I spotted Hiram Mullins's name and started concentrating on the deals he'd handled. I turned over the page of one deed and found the name I'd been seeking. After that it was easy.

I phoned Mary at the office and told her to postpone my afternoon appointments till the following day. "That's easy," she said. "There's only the Kane boy, and his mother says he's feeling fine now. The spots are all gone."

"Tell her to keep him out of school the rest of the week. He can go back on Monday."

"Sheriff Lens has been looking for you."

"I'll call him."

A moment later I had the sheriff's familiar voice on the other end of the line. "Where are you, Doc?"

"Over in Shinn Corners, checking the real-estate transactions regarding the new college."

"Why the college?" he wondered.

"It was the last deal Hiram Mullins worked on before his full retirement."

"Find anything?"

"A motive, I think."

"We've got something too. My deputies came up with a pair of bloodstained overalls. Earl Gunther admits they're his. Had his initials inside."

"Where were they found?"

"On the bank of the creek. Looks like Earl rolled them up and tossed them into the water, only they fell about a foot short. There's a collar and tie with bloodstains, too. Remember, they were missing from Hiram's body."

"I remember. What are you going to do now?"

"Arrest Earl Gunther for the murder, of course. Those overalls are the proof we need."

"Look, Sheriff, you can bring him in for questioning but don't charge him yet. I'll be at your office in an hour."

I covered the back country roads in record time and arrived at the sheriff's office just as he was starting to question the cemetery superintendent. Linda Gunther was outside in the waiting room, looking nervous, and I tried to comfort her.

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"Earl's in trouble, isn't he?"

"Yes, but he could be in lots worse trouble. Try to relax until we finish talking to him."

Inside the office Sheriff Lens was talking with Gunther while a deputy made notes. "I never wore those overalls to kill Mullins," the superintendent was saying. "Someone found them in the tool shed."

"Come on, Earl—you expect us to believe that?"

"I'm innocent!" He turned to me for help. "You believe me, don't you, Dr. Hawthorne?"

I sat down across the table and chose my words carefully. "You didn't kill Mullins, but you're hardly innocent, Earl. You'd better tell us the whole truth if you expect to get out of this with your hide."

"What do you mean?"

"You know how the body got into the Brewster coffin."

"I—"

"What you gettin' at, Doc?" the sheriff asked.

"We've been saying all along that the ground over those coffins was solid and undisturbed, and that's perfectly true. But the ground on the creek side was a different story. The coffins were being moved, remember, because the waters of the flooded creek had so eroded the banks of the creek that some coffins were actually visible, held only by the tree roots that enveloped them. The morning of the murder I watched your crews shovel away the soft dirt and chop out those roots."

"Then you saw that I didn't—"

"I saw what you wanted me to see, Earl. That dirt was soft because it had been removed and replaced the night before. You went down there and saw one coffin virtually free of the earth, its corner badly damaged. You were afraid I, or one of the other trustees, would raise a fuss if we saw that, so you removed it yourself, using the block and tackle on your flatbed truck. You placed the coffin on the truck, carefully hiding it beneath a bulky folded tarpaulin and some tools. You had two crews digging, concentrating on their own efforts, not paying much attention to each other. At some point when I'd strolled off examining tombstones it was easy enough for you to yank off the tarp and reveal one more coffin. I remember thinking that the second and third coffins appeared on the truck before I knew it."

"If he pulled that trick he must have killed Mullins," the sheriff argued.

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"Not at all. Earl had been in trouble with the trustees before and he was afraid we'd fire him for sure if we saw how bad he'd allowed that Brewster plot to get. He was only worried about his job. He had no way of knowing a murderer would find the coffin in the early morning hours and decide it was the perfect place to hide a body."

Sheriff Lens was still skeptical. "Who'd have a motive for killing the old guy?"

"Someone who'd used him to assemble parcels of land for the new college. Someone in a position to hear the talk about a possible new community cemetery with Shinn Corners and use that information to buy up property, then derail that project and sell the land to the private college for a huge profit."

"You talkin' about one of the trustees, Doc?"

"Exactly. No one else would have had the knowledge and the position to bring it off. No one else could have enlisted Mullins's help when he was in virtual retirement. I found the name I expected on those deeds over in Shinn Corners this afternoon. Mullins must have threatened to talk, or maybe tried a little blackmail. It's doubtful that anyone but another board member could have lured him to the cemetery early that morning, probably on the pretext of checking the erosion, and then killed him. The killer had to know about the tool shed, and the extra overalls, to protect his clothing from bloodstains. The killer might even have had a key, in case the shed was locked. The trustee put on the overalls, picked up the hedge trimmers, and went out to meet Mullins when he arrived. A quick thrust beneath the rib cage and it was over. The coffin lid was unscrewed and Mullins was added to those long-dead bones. Only there was too much blood, and a damaged coffin that allowed it to seep through and be seen."

"Which one, Doc?"

"Even without the name on those courthouse records I would have known. The overalls covered everything except the killer's collar and the top of the tie. Why were the dead man's collar and tie missing? Certainly he'd worn them. Mullins even wore them to summer picnics. No, the blood didn't get on the victim's collar and tie but on the killer's! A few drops splattered above the protective overalls. So the killer discarded his and replaced them with the victim's. The bull-necked Mullins would have had a collar big enough to fit any of the other trustees."

"Which one, Doc?" Sheriff Lens asked again.

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"There was only one possibility. Miss Taylor is a woman, after all, with no need for male attire. Randy Freed and I wear shirts with attached collars. Only the dead man and Dalton Swan still wore the detachable collars. Dalton Swan, president of the board of trustees, whose term began before the land deal was closed, who was in the best position to hush up any proposal for a community cemetery and buy the land for himself, who could have gotten Mullins to front for him with the college people, who knew about the tool shed and could have killed Mullins and hidden the body without difficulty, who would have needed to replace his own bloodstained collar and tie before appearing that morning at his bank. The collar and tie you found can be traced to Swan. That and the land deal should be all the evidence you need."

"Dalton Swan. . . ."

"That's your killer. Go get him, Sheriff." ●

"The money damn it, get the *money!*"

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Soccer received little coverage in the United States until last year's World Cup competition; in Britain, of course, it has long been a top sport, whose fans are among the most avid in the world. Martin Edwards gives us an interesting glimpse of soccer fandom in this new Harry Devlin adventure, in which the Liverpool solicitor attempts to crack a murder case nearly fifty years old . . .

NEVER WALK ALONE

by MARTIN EDWARDS

Thirty thousand voices were bellowing the chorus of "You'll Never Walk Alone," a show song that had become a soccer anthem. With a magician's flourish, the referee raised the whistle to his lips and Harry Devlin's companion clenched his fists in exultation. All around the Anfield Road stadium, grown men began to hug each other with joy. Tonight half of Liverpool would be celebrating while the other half was plunged into the deepest gloom. For this was a soccer city like no other and when Liverpool Football Club met its neighbour and deadly rival Everton in a derby match, passions ran higher than in any Latin feud.

"The best comeback since Lazarus," said Harry.

"Six!" yelled his friend Mike Barnett. "Can you credit it? Six!" Delight had rendered him almost incoherent. Mike subscribed to the view that there were two fine soccer teams in the city: Liverpool and Liverpool Reserves. Yet Everton had silenced the Anfield roar by scoring in the tenth minute and for the rest of the first half their players had swaggered around like party gate-crashers. But within seconds of the restart Liverpool equalised and five more goals followed as the contest turned into carnage. Each time the ball hit the back of the net, the home fans launched into their ecstatic rendition of the song that years ago they had made their own. Rodgers and Hammerstein's heirs must be wishing they were on royalties.

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"Six!" crowed Mike again as they edged their way through the throng. "Do you know when Liverpool last scored six in the second half of a derby?"

"I expect you can tell me not only the date but the referee's star sign."

"Never!" said Mike, ignoring him. "They've never done it before. Not once. You and I, Harry, have witnessed history in the making and I don't suppose you even realised."

Harry grinned and shook his head. For him, football was a game about flair and fervour, not numbers in record books. But he knew Mike saw things differently. "So you'll be putting the computer into overdrive tonight?"

"You bet." Mike was information technology manager with a store chain by day and devoted his leisure hours to compiling a database which held every scrap of detail imaginable about Liverpool FC. Harry suspected that one day Sally Barnett would become the first woman to name a piece of software as correspondent. "How about you? Is it your turn as duty solicitor tonight?"

"No, thank God. The phone will be off the hook. Everton's defending may have been criminal, but I'll leave it to their manager to do the plea in mitigation. I'm looking forward to a quiet evening in."

Yet he could not bring himself to give crime a complete miss and spent the evening browsing through a book he had picked up earlier in the week from his favourite secondhand shop in Bold Street. It was a sun-faded hardback written by a man called Gilroy and cheerily entitled *Merseyside's Most Macabre Murder Mysteries*. As well as including old standbys such as the death of James Maybrick and the vicious murder of Julia Wallace, it described various crimes of less renown.

One story in particular caught his attention. It concerned the killing in the year before the Second World War of a teenage girl called Rachel Van Leer. Rachel had lived in a street near Stanley Park, past which Harry and Mike had walked that very afternoon. Her face smiled out from one of the photographs in the centre of the book; it had been taken only a fortnight before her death and, not for the first time in his life, Harry felt glad that none of us can foresee what the future holds. She wore a ponytail and had gaps in her teeth, but although not exceptionally pretty, she glowed with health and vitality. According to the text, she was something of a

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tomboy, keener on outdoor sports than academic study. Her parents were Dutch Jews; they had moved to England from Holland a few years earlier after realising that National Socialism in neighbouring Germany was sure to prove more than a passing phase. Yet their lively young daughter had met a fate as grim as that meted out to so many of the people the family had left behind.

She had disappeared one Saturday evening in November. Her parents had waved her goodbye at seven o'clock when she set off saying that she was going to see a school friend. The thought that she might not be safe had never occurred to anyone. Those were the days when people left their houses unlocked and did not accompany their children to school for fear of what might befall them if they made the journey on their own. But when Rachel did not return by ten as she had promised, her mother and father soon realised that something had gone very wrong. The police were called in, but the news every parent dreads did not come until the next morning when her body was found on a patch of waste ground near the park. She had been raped and strangled.

According to the book, the police had tentatively linked the case to several other unsolved murders of girls and young women committed in different parts of Britain over a period of years. Yet no connection had ever been proved, and Rachel's death appeared to have been the last in the sequence. Gilroy suggested that the culprit might have been a lorry driver, someone who had cause to travel up and down the country without arousing suspicion. In seeking to explain why the apparent sequence of killings had come to a halt, Gilroy concluded that the man must have died during the war and volunteered the opinion that this was a case of just deserts. So far as Harry could tell, this was an author who never bothered with evidence when he could speculate instead.

Something about the story nagged at him, but he could not identify precisely what it was. Closing the book, he switched on the television in time for *Match of the Day*. The highlights of the derby game were shown. For Everton fans, a Sam Peckinpah movie would have made more restful viewing.

But as the sharp-suited telly pundits called for the head of the Everton boss, Harry realised what had troubled him. He reached for the match programme he had picked up at Anfield that afternoon and flicked through the pages until he came to an item to which he had only given a casual glance. Unoriginally headed "Where Are They

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Now?", it was a column which brought supporters of the club up to date with the present doings of heroes from days gone by. And this week the featured footballer was an inside forward whose name was Johann Van Leer. Johann, always known on Merseyside as Johnny.

The black-and-white picture of Johnny Van Leer scrambling a goal against Arsenal was grainy and indistinct, but Harry felt he could still discern a resemblance to young Rachel in the cast of features and pointed chin. He read the notes. Van Leer had made his first team debut in 1946 and soon earned a reputation as a reliable scorer. After seven years with the club he retired to run a pub and was now living quietly with his wife Martha in a seafront flat at Lytham St. Annes.

Harry turned back to Gilroy's book. A couple of vague thoughts about the sequence of murders that had culminated in Rachel's death began to jostle around in his head. Knowing that if he did not take at least one small step to satisfy his curiosity, he would not sleep all night, he picked up his address and telephone book and dialled a number.

"Robert Wells," said a sleepy voice.

"This is Harry Devlin."

"Harry? Why on earth are you calling at this hour? Do you know what time it is?"

"At least I didn't disturb you in the middle of *Match of the Day.*"

"You think I'm a masochist? Don't you remember I'm an Evertonian?"

"Only teasing. Look, something's cropped up. How are you fixed for a bite of lunch tomorrow?"

"I was intending to work on a garrotting from the fifties, down Wolverhampton way."

"You can't have fun all the time. A man's still got to eat."

"What's this all about?"

"Murder, of course."

"Ah," said Robert Wells, his tone brightening. "Why didn't you say so before?"

They talked about sudden death over roast beef and Yorkshire pudding in a pub opposite Wells's Aigburth home. Wells was full of a book he was researching about changing fashions in murder methods from Victorian times to the present day. His provisional title, he explained, was *From Arsenic to Uzi.* As the coffees arrived, Harry

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finally found a chink in the conversation to describe his interest in the Van Leer case.

"Gilroy suggests she might have been one of a series of victims of the same murderer, but he doesn't give many details."

Wells's snort was eloquent dismissal of Gilroy. "Fellow was a scissors-and-paste merchant. Lot of 'em around forty years back writing about true crime. Even more of 'em around today, if you ask me. Bloody plagiarists. Gilroy never had an original thought in his entire career. Remarkable epitaph, really, you'd imagine that even if it was only a fluke, by the law of averages he should have stumbled across at least one theory that no one else had. . . ."

"So his idea that the killings were linked was old hat?" Harry knew it was important with Robert Wells to get the occasional word in edgeways. Wells was a short, red-faced man in his late fifties with a greying ginger beard and a choleric disposition. True crime had always been a hobby with him, and since he had taken early retirement the subject had developed into an obsession. He had always been noted for his encyclopedic knowledge of murders past and present; now he actually wrote the encyclopedias. His wife, a weary woman whose only passion was for gardening, had left him for a local nursery owner a couple of years ago and Harry had acted on the divorce. These days, his former client had no one to talk to but cronies who shared his enthusiasm but lacked his total recall for entrancing facts about rigor mortis and the names of every English hangman since the sixteenth century.

"Of course. Several killings over a period of three or four years shared distinctive features. . . ."

"Young girls, all strangled, each death occurring on a wintry Saturday night."

"Correct. But no one could ever find a geographical link."

Harry pushed his plate to one side. "Gilroy thinks the killer must have had a reason to find himself in different parts of the world every so often and argues that the man must have had a driving job. Yet I can't see anything in his book to substantiate that. Was a particular vehicle seen in the vicinity of several of the murders?"

Wells shrugged. "Not as far as I'm aware. I agree with you: There are no grounds whatsoever to believe he guessed right. Sales reps and truck drivers offered an obvious line of enquiry, but the police never managed to get anyone into the frame."

"Tell me about Rachel. She seems to have been a decent kid. Any relation to Johnny Van Leer, the footballer? It's hardly a common name."

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"Yes, she did have a brother who played for Liverpool. He rates a passing mention in one or two write-ups of the case. Of course, she died years before he became well known. But if you'd like more background, let's slip across the road and I'll have a delve into the card index."

His house was a rambling old place in which he'd lived for twenty-five years; at least Mrs. Wells had not soaked him so hard on the divorce that he'd been forced to move to a poky bedsit. Which was just as well, since his collections of books, magazines, and miscellaneous bits of paper about murder through the ages occupied nine-tenths of the available space in his home. There was a method in the mess, though; to Harry's amazement, Wells was able within a couple of minutes to put his hands on a set of neatly handwritten cards listing key facts about the killings.

"Joan Prendergast, a trainee maths and games teacher, North London, October, nineteen thirty-seven," Wells recited. "Irene Glover, schoolgirl, Birmingham, February, thirty-seven. Marjorie Cox, catering assistant, Newcastle, March, thirty-two. Linda Ratcliffe, another schoolgirl, Sheffield, January, thirty-four. Tess Williams, Cardiff, a promising young tennis player, December, thirty-six. Rachel Van Leer was the last in the line. Take a look at that lever arch file over there. You'll see that it contains a couple of photocopies of articles from the local press about the case."

Harry studied the reports. Both spoke of the devastation the girl's murder had wrought on the Van Leer family and mentioned the fact that she had a brother apprenticed to Liverpool Football Club.

"Could it be that the deaths were entirely unconnected, the work of several killers? After all, there was a significant gap in time between several of them. To say nothing of the regional spread. The north, Midlands, and southeast of England, to say nothing of Wales. You can't have a much further-flung series of crimes than that."

"Coincidence?" Wells shrugged. "Nobody can rule that out absolutely. But my personal view is that the same man was responsible for all six crimes."

"So why did the killings come to an end? Do you agree with Gilroy that the culprit died during the war?"

Wells sniffed. "A typically sloppy idea. Consider the facts. War didn't break out until eighteen months after the Van Leer murder. Yet if you look at the dates of the crimes, our man was becoming increasingly dangerous. It's a classic pattern. The first two crimes were two years apart, the second and third even more distant than

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that. But then he becomes hungrier. Every few months he feels the urge come upon him, he needs to find another victim."

He spoke as dispassionately as if he were describing the feeding habits of a budgerigar, but nonetheless Harry felt a chill. In his imagination, he could picture the unknown killer, spotting a young girl strolling along a deserted street, starting to follow her, breaking into a run, finally overpowering her. . . .

Pulling himself together, he said, "So you believe that he would have struck again shortly after strangling Rachel?"

"It's inevitable, Harry. There's a certain predictability about most serial killers. Take Dennis Nilsen, for example . . ."

"What do you think happened," said Harry, who had no wish to take Dennis Nilsen, "to bring the series to an end?"

Wells tugged at his little beard and gave Harry a fierce glare. The expression increased his resemblance to a gnome with a peptic ulcer. "If you ask me, he didn't see the error of his ways. Those people never do. My guess is that only death would have brought an end to it all. I've long suspected that he was himself killed."

Harry's next destination was a smart, modern, three-bedroom detached in Maghull. His conversation with Robert Wells had reinforced an idea which had come to him in shadowy outline the previous evening, but he still needed to check out the likely suspects. And for that purpose he had phoned Mike Barnett and asked if he could slip round to pick his brains.

"Or, at least, your computer's brains," he had added.

"What do you want to know?"

"A little more about Johnny Van Leer. As well as the Liverpool squad of, say, nineteen thirty-eight."

"I never knew you were keen on football history."

"There's a first time for everything."

Mike's home could hardly have presented a greater contrast to Robert Wells's gloomy Black Museum. Sally Barnett and the couple's two small girls greeted Harry raucously. "I love weekends like this," Sally said. "When he came home from the match last night, he was so jubilant he promised to take us all out to Alton Towers next Sunday. If only Liverpool beat Everton twice a month."

"They would," her husband assured her, "if they played them that often. Now young man, what can I do for you?"

"I read about Van Leer in yesterday's match programme. I'm interested in his family. Did you know his sister was murdered?"

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Mike Barnett shook his head. "Crime's more in your line than mine, Harry. Anyway, I've taken a look at Van Leer's career record. Here you are."

He handed Harry a bulky computer printout. "You'll see I've listed the player's appearances and goals from his debut in nineteen forty-six until he hung up his boots."

Harry glanced at the figures. They were predictably comprehensive. He did not doubt that, if asked, Mike could provide him with details of Van Leer's favourite radio programmes and inside leg measurement.

"He was on Liverpool's books before the War, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but he never made it to the first team at that time. Poor lad, he was only seventeen when hostilities broke out. Like plenty of other good players, he spent his best years fighting Hitler. But the club stayed loyal to him and he repaid their faith when he came back. You don't score eighty goals at the highest level unless you have a finisher's true killer instinct."

Harry studied the printout for a couple of minutes and compared it with the notes he had made at Wells's house about the string of murders. Yet the exercise told him nothing new. Even so, he wondered if it was possible that Mike Barnett's database might help to substantiate his embryonic theory about the murder of Rachel Van Leer and the other five luckless girls.

"You said you wanted to check out the players of nineteen thirty-eight," said Mike. "Come through into the garage."

The garage was a generous size, but still had no room for storing a push-bike, let alone the Nissan Mike parked on the road outside his house. Every inch was crammed with football memorabilia: pennants, rosettes, programmes, and other souvenirs, all in the familiar red of Liverpool Football Club. A shelving unit held dozens of books about the game and at the back of the garage was a desk on which stood a small VDU screen and printer.

He tapped a command into the machine and the printer began to buzz. "What exactly are you looking for?"

"An old mystery has come to life. I wondered if one of the players of those days was a nomad. I'm interested in anyone who had played for several different clubs before moving to Anfield. Teams like Newcastle United and Birmingham City, Tottenham Hotspur, Cardiff, and Sheffield Wednesday. Would you have that kind of information?"

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"Of course," said Mike proudly, issuing another instruction to his computer. "Ask me about anyone who's pulled on the red jersey in the past hundred and odd years, and I'll tell you anything you want to know about him. Here we are."

He passed a closely printed sheet headed PREVIOUS CLUBS to Harry and began to read over his shoulder. "Nobody quite fits your bill." He pointed to a name. "Kit Jasper is the closest you'll get. He played for Newcastle and Cardiff City as well as the other Sheffield team, United. But not Spurs or Brum."

Harry gazed gloomily at the sheet. The black and white data seemed to taunt him. So near and yet so far. And so much for his bright idea.

It had seemed like such an ingenious idea, too, he explained as Sally made them a cup of tea. Given the similarities between the six murders, with hindsight, it seemed inevitable that the crimes should have been linked. The problem lay in explaining what kind of murderer might have had reasons to travel so widely. The 1930s were hardly the Dark Ages, but still a time when people moved around rather less than in the present day. For all the speculation that the culprit might have been a driver or a travelling salesman, no one seemed to have thought that football has always had its share of gypsies, players who are regularly transferred from one club to another. Nor would the idea have occurred to Harry had he not come to an account of Rachel's murder straight from the derby match.

Mike was outraged. "You're surely not suggesting that a Liverpool player might have been a serial killer?"

"That would be one for the record books, wouldn't it?" said Harry mischievously. "But think about it for a moment. All the crimes were committed on winter Saturdays—football days—and all the victims were sporty or outdoor types, the sort who might have been more interested in soccer than most members of their sex. Rachel Van Leer had a brother at Anfield, so she was especially likely to know one of the players."

Mike grunted. "Sounds very thin to me."

"Compared to some of my clients' alibis, it's plausible. I thought: Suppose I could find a player who had a spell with a team in all the places where the girls were killed. Newcastle, Cardiff, Sheffield, and so on. Trouble is, no one fits the bill."

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"It wouldn't be the first time. What do you have in mind?"

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"Liverpool and Sheffield aren't the only places with two top football clubs. Aston Villa play in Birmingham and Arsenal are as much a North London outfit as the Spurs. Mind you," Mike scratched his nose ruminatively, "that doesn't solve the problem, does it? You would still have to find someone who turned out for all those teams."

"Unless," Harry said slowly, "killers, like football teams, sometimes play away from home. I presume you have a list of all the matches in which Kit Jasper appeared?"

"Of course. Though why you're so interested in him, I'm not entirely sure. He never made any impact with the Reds, for all his past reputation as a goal scorer. Although in one way, of course, he was unique."

Harry leaned forward in his chair. "Go on."

"Sorry, I keep forgetting you're not a soccer history buff. But this may interest you. Kit Jasper was the only man who ever committed suicide while still on Liverpool's playing staff."

"So what makes you think you know who killed my sister?" asked Johnny Van Leer.

They were sitting in the living room of the small seafront home Johnny and his wife shared. Harry had motored up to Lytham after a morning in court, having phoned to make an appointment the previous day. The old man had agreed and even said he was not too surprised by the call; the feature in the programme for the derby match had already prompted a couple of the club's older fans to get in touch.

"But I want to talk about something very personal," Harry had said. "I hope it won't distress you too much after all these years, but I am aware that your sister Rachel was murdered in nineteen thirty-eight."

"Rachel?" Johnny Van Leer sounded suspicious. "What about her?"

"I believe I can name the man who strangled her."

He'd heard a sharp intake of breath at the other end of the line. After a pause Johnny Van Leer said, "And who might that be?"

"I'd rather not discuss it over the telephone."

Another pause, even longer this time. Then: "We'd better talk about this face-to-face. I'll see you tomorrow."

So now they were face-to-face and Harry had to explain the process of reasoning that had brought him here.

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"I checked the Liverpool fixture list. On the afternoon of the Saturday night when Joan Prendergast was killed, the Reds had a game against Arsenal at Highbury, half a mile away from the scene of the crime. Same thing with the Birmingham girl, Irene Glover—they were visiting Aston Villa that day. It would have been easy for Jasper to make some excuse and hang around in the city where he had been playing after a match."

Johnny Van Leer bowed his head. "I didn't know anything about that. Bear in mind, I was only a lad at the time."

"I did think," said Harry gently, "you might be able to tell me a little about Kit Jasper."

"What makes you think I can? He was long before my time. I only made my debut after the war."

"Yes, but you were on the ground staff as a teenager before war broke out. You must have come across him."

The old man's face was a grizzled mask. He seemed to be deliberating how much to admit to a stranger. Eventually he said, "I suppose I must have cleaned his boots once or twice."

"What sort of man was he?"

A deep breath. "You need to understand, Mr. Devlin, that in those days lads like me were two a penny. We were in awe of the first-teamers. They were our gods. And Jasper had been a decent player. Moved around a bit, like, but scored plenty of goals in his time."

Harry nodded. "I've seen his record. But the flow had dried, hadn't it, by the time he joined Liverpool? He'd scarcely hit the target once in eighteen months. No wonder Newcastle and Cardiff let him go. Liverpool thought they'd picked up a bargain, but he never managed a single goal for them."

"You've done your homework," said the old man. "Any road, I did know him. Good-looking feller, as it happens. Dark, broad-shouldered. Unmarried, though I reckon he always had an eye for the girls. 'Specially the young ones. That was why I've blamed myself for so long—for not putting two and two together after I saw him with our Rachel."

Heart pounding with excitement, Harry said, "What happened?"

"It was the day she died," said Van Leer. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped it across his face. "Sorry, Mr. Devlin, I'm not too old for tears. I loved my sister, you know. She was a lovely kid. We were a close family, we'd been through a lot together after leaving Holland for a new life in a strange land. Any road, it was early evening, after the match. We'd lost at home and Jasper had

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missed a sitter. The crowd was on his back all afternoon. I was walking away from the ground when I caught sight of Rachel. She'd watched the game—she was a keen fan, loved her football. We'd planned to go home together, but I saw her bump into Jasper. As far as I know, they'd never met before. They were exchanging a few words; neither of them saw me on the other side of the road. I was a shy boy, didn't want to interrupt. I turned the corner and Rachel caught me up a few minutes later. She didn't mention Jasper. We had tea with our parents and then she set off—supposedly to see a friend of hers from school. I had no reason to doubt her word. She'd never lied to me, she wasn't that kind of girl."

"And that was the last you saw of her?"

"That's right. I'll never forget how I felt when the police told us they had found her body. I was in shock for forty-eight hours. I simply couldn't take it in."

"Did you tell anyone that Rachel had met Jasper?"

Johnny Van Leer shook his head. "Truth to tell, it actually slipped my mind for a while. After all, I had no reason to think it was significant. But the Friday after she was killed, I remembered. The club had been sympathetic to me, they understood I wouldn't want to turn up at the ground for a while. So I decided to call on Jasper. He had digs in Viceroy Street and I turned up there that evening. My ideas were fuzzy—I simply wondered if Rachel might have given him a clue about what she intended to do that night. The police suspected her story about seeing a school pal was a fairy tale; they thought she meant to see a boyfriend."

"And you put this to Jasper?"

"As best I could. By the time I arrived there he'd been drinking hard for hours. The place stank with booze. I was shocked to find one of my idols had feet of clay. But it was obvious he was deeply depressed about his form. The manager had already dropped him from the side for the following day's game."

"What did he tell you about his meeting with Rachel?"

"Tried to deny it at first, in the way drunks and small kids have when they tell a lie. Then he changed his story, passed their conversation off as something and nothing. Said he couldn't help at all."

"He killed himself that same weekend, didn't he? Stuck his head in his landlady's oven. When did you decide he must have murdered your sister?"

"Who knows that he did?" Johnny Van Leer said slowly. "I simply couldn't bear to think that he might have known more about Ra-

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chel's death than he was willing to admit. Nor that my call had made him think there was no escape." He bowed his head. "I couldn't face that responsibility, Mr. Devlin. And so I told no one, not even Martha. Until today."

"But?" Harry said.

The old man paused and gave a long, low sigh.

"Ever since—it's haunted me."

Harry said nothing. He sensed that Johnny was reliving the past and asking himself for the thousandth time if it would have made any difference if he had plucked up the courage to break into the conversation Jasper had struck up with Rachel. She was like the other chosen victims: keen on sport and flattered to be approached by a soccer star. But Jasper had a cruel passion and craved something more than they were ready to give, something that might take the place of the goals he lived for yet had failed to score. Mike Barnett's records revealed that each murder had taken place at a time when Jasper had endured a long barren spell. The girls had offered him a release. And in the quiet of the little living room, a single phrase echoed in Harry's head. Never walk alone, never walk alone, never walk alone.

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Bill Bankier has turned his pen to many tasks in the course of his career; he made his living first as an advertising copy writer, and later, after deciding to leave an executive position in advertising to write full time, as a writer of series romance novelettes. His real love, however, has always been the short story, and the seeming ease with which he produces his mystery short stories has inspired many newer writers, including EQMM *Readers Award winner Doug Allyn . . .*

THE PREACHER AND THE KID

by WILLIAM BANKIER

The man was carrying a Bible. The kid had one foot on a skateboard. Harmon Henderson approached on his way to Beverly Hills Library. They had an individual cornered against the stucco parapet between Crescent Drive and the new library building.

The kid was doing the talking. "Are you perfect? Is anybody perfect? I'm not perfect. Jesus wasn't perfect and He knew it. You try? Good. Jesus tried."

The man with the Bible had on ragged clothes. Two plastic carry-bags beside him were stuffed with what might have been his worldly goods. He had the weathered skin of somebody who sleeps out of doors. His eyes were glassy. The kid was better dressed in jeans and a pure white T-shirt. He could not have been more than seventeen years old.

Their mark—for Henderson was convinced some kind of scam was going on—was trying to get away. He was wearing T-shirt, jeans, and basketball shoes. The expression on his face was past irritation, approaching panic. He wanted to break through, but he was too polite to say anything. Victimization, Henderson told himself, can begin with good manners.

As he moved on past, the scruffy preacher was saying, "I have shaped many lives. And in the process of my own life, I have created weapons for soldiers gone mad. But that life was taken from me,

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and just in time. I thought I was being robbed, though it turned out to be my salvation. I came into the streets. Let me save you, before it's too late."

The kid was making arcs on his skateboard, hemming in the victim. The man with the Bible was holding it open above his head, balanced on a flat hand, doing Jimmy Swaggart footwork—that boyish, pagan dance.

Henderson went on inside the library. He passed the detectors and located an empty table in the periodicals room. He opened his briefcase, took out a few sheets of hotel stationery, found a pen that worked, and began writing a letter to his brother.

"Dear Jason: I hope this finds you in better shape than when you wrote me." He sat for a full minute, frozen. "My pen refuses to move. It is very difficult for me, the younger brother, to come at you with words you would rather not read.

"But the issue is obvious. You have to stop drinking. Dr. Fiddler told you that. And, to keep on with your medication. You must stay on the lithium, and alcohol and lithium do not mix.

"The illness you are struggling with is not your fault. It is a Henderson legacy, passed on to us by poor, tormented Mom. God only knows how she must have suffered without the medication we have available today. Her suicide was a slap in the face to the rest of us, but we can understand what made her do it.

"I'll cut to the chase, as we say in the screenwriting trade. You must not, repeat *not,* get on an airplane and fly out here. Not in your present condition. Hear me on this, Jase. It would be wrong.

"How is Dad? Tell him I think about him and would write him a letter if I knew his address. Is he still camping out upstate with his boondock floozie?

"I can hear you saying that it's easy for Harmon to chirp at you with such confidence. My mood swings are so much more manageable than yours. You are right, it isn't fair. It's the hands we were dealt, and we must play them.

"I believe, Jason, if you could put yourself back in the classroom, stand up in front of those children, and teach, you would be able to function. I have not forgotten what you told me about that—the panic, the vomiting. But it's been almost a year. Why not give it a shot?

"Time for me to get back to work. Sorry I could not endorse your plan for a visit. How about I steal a few days between projects and fly back and hang out with you? Help you populate that big old

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house. We might even persuade Dad back and whip his butt at Ping-Pong. Remember the two of us at one end of the table and him at the other?

"Keep the faith, Jase. As ever, your little brother, Harm."

Back outside the library, carrying the letter in a stamped, addressed envelope, Harmon Henderson saw two police cars and several uniformed officers. Yellow tape was holding back spectators. He saw a mounded yellow tarpaulin on the sidewalk with the soles of two shoes at one end of it.

"Don't stand there, sir. Keep moving." The cop had an ID plate on his shirt. His name was Stover.

Henderson said, "Half an hour ago, I saw a man being hassled by two other people. Right about here."

Stover led him to the tarpaulin, where he turned back a corner. "That's him. There was a lunatic with a Bible and a kid on a skateboard." He described the pair and what had been going on. "That's about it. I just walked on by. Was he shot?"

"Stabbed." Stover was writing down everything. He included Henderson's name and the telephone number of the Hotel Amato a hundred yards away on Crescent Drive. He said he would need him to come in and identify the suspects if they were apprehended.

Henderson had stayed at the Amato years ago when he first arrived in Los Angeles. In those days, it had been a run-down establishment, sixty years old, with faulty plumbing and sloping, creaking floors. Since then, it had been closed for a year, refurbished, and reopened. Rooms were smaller now, doors fit snugly, and plenty of hot water flowed from shiny chromium fixtures. Henderson had liked it better the old way.

Wendy Amato was on duty. Henderson ducked his head to peer in through the guest-service window. Wendy was kicked back in the swivel armchair with her boots propped on an old oak desk. Her father was seventy-five, Wendy was forty; someday, all this would be hers.

"Your wife called," she said. "Not long after you went out."

"A man just got murdered. I didn't see it happen but I saw him before and after. There was a street preacher and a kid on a skateboard. They had this guy hemmed in. I went into the library and when I came out, the guy was dead."

"Was he shot?"

"Stabbed."

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Wendy had dark eyes in a solemn face. "I heard a siren. I wondered what it was."

"Did my wife sound serious?"

"She sounded mad as hell."

Henderson trotted upstairs. He unlocked the door of room twenty-five, went inside, and tossed his briefcase on the second bed. That was another thing about the revamped hotel: all the rooms now had twin beds. It made him feel inadequate. He sat on the one he was using, picked up the telephone, dialed his home number.

Blanche was still angry. "Where were you? You're supposed to be working."

"Little Blanchie Henderson," he said. "If I'd been working, your call would have interrupted me. My whole reason for being checked in here is so I can write the damned script without constant interruptions."

"Hilliard got stung by a wasp."

"Where?"

"In the garden."

"I mean where?"

"On the back of his neck. He was painting the roses."

"I liked them the color they were." He did his Three Stooges laugh. "Nyuck, nyuck, nyuck."

"The boy is in pain. There's a big, red swelling. And he spilled his watercolors."

"What can I do? You have to take care of it, Blanche. Is the stinger still in him? Pull it out with tweezers."

"What if it gets infected? What if it reaches his brain?"

"You're dramatizing." Henderson stood up and took three short steps to the desk. He lifted the dust cover from the keyboard of his word processor. The scribbled pages of the open notebook looked indecipherable. "If you're worried, take him to the doctor. Do you want me to come home?"

"No." Practice had made perfect her tone of resignation. "Finish the damn script. Let's clear the decks. I want to drive up to Big Sur."

"What happens to Hilliard?"

"He'll stay with Mom and Dad. I've alerted them."

Henderson had no sooner put down the telephone than it rang. He picked it up again. "Now what?"

It was Wendy. "You have a visitor."

"Who is it?"

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"Your brother."

Henderson could hear Jason's voice over the telephone. He could also hear him through the closed door of the room. His brother was singing down there in the lobby. He was doing an imitation of Al Jolson.

"California, here I am!

"And Scarlett, I don't give a damn!"

Jason ordered a beer with his pizza. Noticing his brother's disapproval, he said, "Cool out, Harm. I am not out of control."

"You should have let me know you were coming."

"I did."

"I mailed you a letter this morning. I explained I can't have visitors right now."

"So when I get home and I find your letter there and I read it, I won't come."

"It isn't a joke. I have a deadline."

"I'll only be in the room to sleep. The rest of the time I'll be out discovering the delights of Los Angeles. We can meet for meals."

"You don't know the city. It's dangerous driving around L.A. in a rental car."

"You can tell me the safe neighborhoods."

"There aren't any. I witnessed a murder on the street this morning. Right here in Beverly Hills." Henderson described the event outside the library.

Jason was fascinated. "Which one do you think had the knife? The preacher or the kid on the skateboard?"

"It could have been somebody else entirely. Nobody saw it happen."

"The guy with the Bible did it. Whenever you confront people about religion, you have to be ready to kill or be killed."

"If you say so, Jase." Henderson was in no hurry to get back to his writing. He found he was settling in with his brother, like old times.

"Think about it," Jason went on. "Religion is mostly about loving your neighbor. But it's been the major excuse for slaughter throughout history."

"That's the atheist's view. It's a bad rap. If religion had never been invented, do you think we'd be angels? We'd be the same animals we are now, only minus the guilt." Henderson signaled for the check.

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"I prefer us knowing we're doing evil things. Hating ourselves, and trying to improve."

It was a short walk from the restaurant back to the hotel. Passing a shiny white sedan parked at the curb, Jason took out a key and unlocked the passenger door. "Get in," he told his brother. "You can guide me on a little tour."

Henderson protested, but briefly. The car smelled new inside; it shone. Jason handled it well. "Hang a right," the younger brother suggested and they began heading towards West Hollywood. "Santa Monica Boulevard is a thousand miles long. Going the other direction, you'd end up at the ocean. That's an okay destination in daytime. But at night, the gangs own the beaches and the pier."

"Is it really that bad?"

"Watch television, read the paper. One evening, a few weeks ago, a couple was being attacked and robbed on Santa Monica beach. Another guy came running to help them. Bad idea. He was shot dead."

They drove north on Highland Avenue until they reached Hollywood Boulevard. "Is this it?" Jason asked.

"That's the Chinese Theater over there. If you want to park, you can check out the footprints on the sidewalk."

After half an hour of wandering from slab to slab of concrete, reading the famous signatures, Jason said, "I feel sad. I've heard about this place all my life. Now I'm here." He spread his arms. "It's so small, and so hokey. It's like it was invented by kids."

"Sorry you're disappointed."

"I'm not. I needed the experience. This was a dream, and it turns out to be unimportant. It gives perspective."

Back in the car, Henderson gave directions for the drive up to Griffith Park and the Observatory. Standing behind a parapet surrounding the great dome, they were able to see the metropolis stretching to the horizon in all directions. Pointing to a cluster of tall buildings, Henderson said, "That's downtown. Never go there after dark." He indicated a grey area to the right. "If there was less smog, you could see the ocean."

"And the dangerous beaches."

"I'm giving you good advice. Those other tall buildings are in and around Westwood. That's where UCLA is located. Westwood is a charming village. It used to be a nice place to hang out."

"Used to be?"

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"The gangs discovered how to get there. We've had store windows smashed. Looting. Exchange of gunfire, of course. A Japanese girl who happened to be in the wrong place got killed."

On the drive back to Beverly Hills, they were heading west on Melrose, passing the glitzy shops, when Jason spotted a squat red building with a bar sign on it. "Can I buy the guide a beer?"

"Just one."

It was dark inside, the place smelled of hops and tobacco smoke, and the walls, floor, and furniture were all of weathered wood. When they were tucked in and sipping beer, the visitor said, "You don't like Los Angeles very much, do you?"

"The geography is magnificent—the hills, the ocean. The weather must have been superb before the air was made foul. But there is no city. There are only streets and cars. I blame the cars, which means I blame the distances."

"It can't be that bad."

"In New York or London there are neighborhoods, settings that feel permanent. You can just be among the buildings, you sense the history. Not here in L.A. This is a Potemkin metropolis. The crew could strike the fake stucco flats tonight, and tomorrow everything would be desert."

The second pitcher of beer was not showing up in Jason's driving. "Whatever else," he said as they headed towards Beverly Hills, "these streets are straight and wide."

They turned onto San Vicente in the direction of Santa Monica Boulevard. Leaving the intersection, Jason said, "What's that?"

Glancing over at the plastic bulk of the Pacific Design Center, Henderson said, "We call that 'The Blue Whale.' "

"I don't mean the building. I mean the old guy sitting on the steps. And the kid beside him holding a skateboard in his arms." Jason guided the car into a parking spot.

"Keep driving. We have to find a cop."

"Where's your sense of adventure?" Jason switched off and unbelted. "Besides, I'm driving with beer on my breath. Come on, we can make a citizen's arrest."

"We need the police," Henderson whined, but he followed his brother along the sidewalk towards the couple on the steps. The Center was closed, there was no pedestrian traffic near the building. "Remember, one of them has a knife."

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Jason took a couple of dollar bills from his shirt pocket. It was the change from the last order of beer. "Excuse me, sir," he said as he approached. "Is that a Bible in your lap? My soul needs saving."

The street preacher got to his feet and took the money. The boy stood on his skateboard and began drifting from side to side. The wheels growled on the pavement. Henderson kept a safe distance.

"All donations gratefully received," the preacher said. His tone might have been mocking.

"My brother and myself," the visitor went on, "have just come from a very nice bar. I flew in today from back East. We haven't seen each other in years. We have a lot to talk about."

"Can we go?" Henderson suggested.

"We drank two pitchers of beer in no time. And we all know how God loves drunks. But that's what has me puzzled. I feel as if He's deserted me."

Henderson stared at his brother. He was looking for evidence of sarcasm, but Jason appeared to be sincere.

"God is with you always," the preacher said. His face was sad.

"Then why do I feel bereft?" Jason went on as he looked from one to the other. "Can it be what I did this morning? I stabbed a man in front of the Beverly Hills Library. I was visiting my brother. He lives down the street in the Amato Hotel."

The boy on the skateboard backed off. "These are cops," he said. He began driving the board with one foot, racing across Melrose and down the slope of San Vicente.

"Let him go," Jason said. "He'll be easy enough to find. The preacher will tell us all about him."

"I only know his name," the ragged man said. "Paul. I asked his name and he said Paul. He started hanging around me yesterday. He said he was a believer. He's an articulate lad, I gave him a few things to say. It was useful. Some people will accept a boy's testimony more easily than they will mine. I appear unstable. He seems pure."

"We aren't interested in Paul," Jason said.

"He told me they were abusing him at home. You never know these days. It could be true, or he might be quoting from Sally or Phil or Oprah."

Henderson had moved closer now that it was two against one. And that one looked to be on his last legs. "What's your story?" he said.

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"Eighteen months ago I owned a house in Bakersfield. I had a wife. And a computer job in a Defense plant. My wife died of cancer. There's a lot of it in that part of California. We think it's caused by pesticides. Then I lost my job. The company ran on Pentagon contracts which have now been canceled. Wasn't that a dirty trick the Russians played on us? We depended so heavily on their opposition."

Jason said quietly, "Do you still have your knife?"

"I lost the house back in April. The monthly payments were obscene. So here I am, picking up a few dollars in exchange for the only thing I have left to offer—my faith."

"And your Bible."

"It's been in my family for generations." The preacher riffled the pages, then pressed the book against his chest. "My parents brought it with them from Nebraska before the war. Mother wrote names and dates in it. There are many births, marriages, and deaths recorded here."

Jason turned to his brother. "Are you feeling what I'm feeling?"

"I'm uncomfortable."

"I think we should drive away and let this man disappear."

"I disagree," Henderson whispered. "One of us should keep an eye on him while the other finds a telephone and dials nine-one-one."

The preacher was staring at Jason. "Did I hear you say you stabbed a man today?"

"I could be mistaken," Jason said. "Maybe it was you who did the stabbing."

"All I did was tell him the word of God. He put his hands on me. He threw me aside. Then he struck Paul with his fist."

"Can I see the knife?"

Henderson took his brother by the arm and drew him away. "We're pressing our luck."

"Don't let that man escape," the preacher said. He got to his feet. "Hold him." The old man was fishing inside his jacket pocket. He drew out a heavy jackknife. He clawed at it, a blade snapped into place.

"There it is," Jason said. "There's the murder weapon!"

The preacher was no longer disoriented. "I'll take care of this," he said. He seemed to shed years, began making moves like an athlete. Knife held low, at arm's length, he stepped towards the brothers, who separated. He went for Jason, swinging the knife in a backhand thrust. Dodging, Jason fell backwards, catching himself on one arm as he hit the pavement.

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Henderson came at the preacher from behind, managing to put a forearm under his chin, applying pressure in a choke hold. The fight was over quickly. "Get the knife!" he yelled.

Resistance faded. The knife fell to the sidewalk. Jason kicked it away.

"See those telephones by the building?" Henderson said. "Go call the cops. I can hold him."

"I hurt my wrist," Jason said, cradling it in his other hand. "I hope it isn't broken."

An LAPD black-and-white arrived within minutes, then another. The preacher was cuffed and placed in a caged backseat. Jason's injury needed treatment. It would be a short ride to Cedars-Sinai Emergency. Henderson spotted the Bible lying on the pavement. He ran to pick it up and bring it back.

"He was carrying this. It's his family Bible. It should tell you something about him."

The cop who accepted the book opened the cover. "This won't tell us anything," he said. "It's a Gideon Bible. The old loony probably stole it from some motel room."

Jason's aching wrist was diagnosed as a sprain. It was wrapped tightly and he was given a sling. Henderson had driven the rental car to the hospital parking lot. Now, he chauffeured them back to the hotel in Beverly Hills.

"The old man lied about the Bible." Jason flexed his fingers. "Was anything he told us true?"

"There may have been a family Bible back where he came from. This just wasn't it."

The brothers slept late. The bedside telephone rang at half-past ten. Henderson answered. The caller identified himself as Sergeant Stover of the Beverly Hills Police. He did most of the talking for the next couple of minutes. When Henderson put down the telephone, he rolled over and looked at Jason in the other bed. He had his head propped on one fist, elbow buried in the pillow, eyes half closed. It was like old times when the boys used to tell each other their dreams.

"What's up?"

"That was the Beverly Hills cops. They got a report from the LAPD about our encounter with the preacher. Seems he is not the killer."

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"He had the knife."

"Not the right knife. The body I saw yesterday morning outside the library had been stabbed with a broad blade. It had a serrated edge. Our old dude was carrying a jackknife."

"I'll be darned."

"The cop asked about you. I said you're okay. But they don't appreciate us tangling with suspects. We could get killed. Was I right or was I right?"

Jason yawned. "No chance of that now. The episode is finished."

After scratching his scalp for a while, Henderson said, "I think I'll walk down the street to the bakery. You want a muffin and coffee?"

"Large."

Ten minutes later, the younger brother appeared in the hotel doorway. He stood on the patio for a few moments, enjoying the warmth of the sun. Then he headed down the street with his hands in his pockets.

There was a lot of traffic moving in both directions on Crescent Drive. It masked the sound of the skateboard approaching from up the slope near the library. Balanced expertly, Paul lifted his T-shirt and drew the broad-bladed knife from its sheath inside the waistband of his jeans. He was experiencing a familiar surge of power. After all the years of being cursed at and beaten, of being told he was no good and being thrown out of the house, this was his release—one of the times when he took control and gave something back.

Henderson was not aware of anything happening until there was a break in traffic. Then he heard a struggle going on behind his back. He turned and saw his brother pinning the arms of the boy Paul while a skateboard went sliding. Jason was in pajamas and bare feet. Henderson pitched in and pried the knife from the boy's hand. He had time to notice the blade's serrated edge.

A passing motorist observed the fight going on, stopped, and called 911 on his cellular telephone. Within minutes, a police car arrived and the attacker was taken into custody. Henderson explained who he was, and how this event fitted into yesterday's crime. The police left the scene with their prisoner.

"Now aren't you glad I came to California?" Jason said when they were alone on the pavement.

"What are you doing out here half dressed in Beverly Hills?"

"I forgot to tell you," the older brother said. "I need double cream in my coffee." ●

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A journalist in Britain's biggest, brashest holiday town, Blackpool, Barbara Crossley is the recipient of a British Press award for her coverage of sea pollution problems. She used this background for her first crime novel, Candyfloss Coast *(1991) and its sequel* Rollercoaster *(1994), both of which feature her journalist heroine Anna Knight . . .*

PASS THE POISON

by BARBARA CROSSLEY

Jack Bannister was a very happy man—indeed he was meant to be happy, for he was king for a day. He sat back on his throne, dressed in medieval regalia, with a curtain-cloak, Bacofoil crown, and rolling-pin sceptre, monarch of his very own revels.

The pageant, held to celebrate May Day, had been Jack's idea—as chairman of the parish council he'd wanted to greet the village's first French twin-town visitors with what he termed "a grand spectacle of olde Englishe traditions." The fact that Trundlebridge had never existed in olde Englande, and had only grown up in the 1960s as a genteel dormitory for Manchester commuters, had mattered not a jot to Jack, who set about organising a jousting tournament and Maypole dancing with all the zeal of his former role as boss of a chain of electrical stores.

The French visitors had arrived the night before, some of them staying at the village pub, the Pug and Cushion, where they were treated to their first taste of olde Englishe beer (response: *"Merde!"*). However, several had overcome their fastidiousness to the extent that they had woken up on May Day morning with heads like banged anvils, and it was with weary eyes that they took in the scene—sunshine, a playing field, lolling villagers, a medieval encampment (or rather, a wedding marquee liberally pennanted), and Jack enthroned on a rickety dais, bewigged, rouge-cheeked, and benign. *("Merde encore.")*

"Old King Cole was a merry old soul and a merry old soul was he!" a chorus of courtiers sang around Jack, while a jester waggled

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his bells and churned a football rattle as best he could between sneezes.

The jester, Pug and Cushion landlord Frank Spode, was much too thin and weedy for the victualler's profession, habitually sickly, and insufferably sorry for himself. He often left his wife Lobelia to man the pumps, retiring to bed and dosing his ailments with comforting remedies while she pulled pints with the gusto of a true cellarwoman who knew how to treat fine ale. No one could understand why the luscious Lobelia stuck with lugubrious Frank, but in truth it was the pub she loved, and the pub and Frank came as a package, his money in the enterprise, his name over the door. No Frank, no pub, no job, end of story. Jack Bannister knew all this because for the past eighteen months he had been having an affair with Lobelia, and she'd told him so.

"Yo-ho-ho-ho," went Jack, beaming with bonhomie and anticipation every time Frank washoo-ed and sniffled. He even offered his own regal handkerchief when Frank ran out of space on his own. "Nasty cold you've got there, Frank. You should've stayed in bed with a nice hot toddy."

"Chadce'd be a fide thig." His rimed eyes blinked wetly. "Lobelia said she was dabbed if she's spedt a week sewig this costube for dothig."

"She's in charge of the bar today, is she?"

"Yes—ad todight, I wod't be able to take over, dot with this stodker—she'll be workig till the early hours what with all the visitors: She wod't be for gallivadtig." This warning seemed so pointed that Jack immediately felt hot and uncomfortable.

"It's a lot of work for her though, Frank; it's my guess this'll be your busiest day of the year."

"Cad't be helped—she's got pledty of bar staff—I'b goig straight to bed as sood as I get this costube off, ad I'b dot gettig up till I'b better."

"You do that, and don't forget the hot toddy—a good slug of whisky, a squeeze of lemon, and, most important, a big dollop of honey."

A big dollop of honey, yes, that was the key, not only to the making of a good hot toddy, but to Jack's future happiness with the lovely Lobelia. That was why he took such secret pleasure in Frank's cold—it was what he'd been waiting for. Jack remembered handing the jar to her nine months ago as they cuddled in the front seat of his Volvo, hidden from prying eyes under sheltering trees.

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"I brought you some honey—it's from my own bees," he'd told her proudly. "It's a special batch, just for you."

Jack had taken up beekeeping as a suitable country pursuit when he'd sold his electrical shops to a nationwide megastore-PLC and retired to Trundlebridge's carefully planned acres. The beehives thrummed with industry behind his mock-Georgian house, and he managed them just as he had his business, with order, panache, and a keen eye for the balance sheet. But when he returned from his hives the splendid house felt hollow, furnished with only his new acquisitions, no history in it. His wife had shot off with a sparkplug manufacturer as soon as the kids were grown, taking much of their joint possessions with her; the rest he'd thrown out in pique, and thus retired and wifeless he'd flung himself into country life with the enthusiasm of a man who had a cavernous gap to fill.

Hence the bees, hence the parish council, the town-twinning, the pageant, the pub . . . and Lobelia. Though in his sixties, Jack still had vigour and verve, in contrast to the ailing Frank; he was also generous and appreciative of Lobelia's skills—it had been many years since Frank had given her so much as a "Nice top on that ale, gal."

So, every Tuesday, when Lobelia went to the supermarket in town, she'd steal away afterwards to meet Jack while her frozen peas melted in the boot, and every Thursday, when Lobelia was supposed to be at step-aerobics, she'd step instead through a hole in Jack's hedge and come back thoroughly aerated.

But these odd hours hadn't been enough for Jack. He began to pine for Lobelia to fill his empty house; he'd watch his bees paying court to their queen, he'd tend his garden, and plot how to make her his. All seemed hopeless; she wouldn't give up the Pug and Cushion, not even for him. He'd been laying netting over his show-piece azaleas when the solution pierced him like a bee's sting. The net-laying was a nuisance, but necessary for a beekeeper when the shrubs were in full, fragrant flower: azalea nectar was viciously toxic, leading even to death—not for the bees, but for anyone eating their . . . that was when the idea struck. He dragged one hive over to the azalea bush and laid the netting over the lot.

"I brought you some honey," he'd said a few weeks later, handing her the handsome antique glass jar. "It's from my own bees. It's a special batch, just for you."

"Oh, Jack, you shouldn't have—it's lovely of you, but—I don't like honey."

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"Oh, don't you?" responded Jack, feigning surprise—he knew she didn't, she'd mentioned it once, and he'd stored it up like everything she said. "Well, never mind, take the jar anyway as a keepsake from me, only don't dole out its contents for your customers, it's too good for them. . . . I'm sure Frank'll enjoy it," he concluded magnanimously. "As long as you don't tell him it's from me."

"Yes, maybe," she replied, feeling churlish about disliking his present. "I've seen him shovel honey by the spoonful into hot toddies when he has a cold." She stroked the heavy jar, its glass top marbled with blue and white swirls. "Oh Jack, it's a lovely pot, I'll keep it always, thank you, thank you, thank you." And she gave him a luscious, warming kiss that was worth six electrical shops to Jack.

When she got home she put the honey jar on the shelf, and then on an impulse she took it down again. *I'm not giving Jack's honey to Frank, it wouldn't seem right,* she thought to herself. *I'll give it to my sister, and ask her to return the jar when she's finished with it.*

Lobelia's sister, a hard-up church deacon, greatly appreciated the present and promised to give the jar back as soon as the honey was gone. But it went rather sooner than she imagined, for that evening a charity collector called, asking for tombola prizes for a fund-raising fete. She hadn't been shopping, all she had to spare was a tin of broad beans, which looked a bit mean, so she spooned the honey into a decorative beehive-pot, kept the jar to give back to Lobelia, and sent the charity collector away satisfied.

The honey sat on the tombola stall and was eventually won by a curmudgeonly pensioner, who would actually much rather have won the bottle of Emva Cream next to it. He wasn't very fond of honey, but he was a miserly soul who never gave anything away if he could help it, and so he took it home thinking it would save on jam for a few days. However, he fell ill the night before he meant to apply it to his breakfast toast and was swept off to hospital in a blaze of sirens and flashing lights, there to stay for a fortnight. His daughter came to clear out the food cupboards and took the honey and biscuits and butter and barley wine, from all of which he was barred with his newly diagnosed heart condition.

The daughter, a capable widow in her forties called Penelope Haslet, happened to be the chef at the Pug and Cushion, and in her spare time was a keen home winemaker. When she saw the honey she thought she'd experiment—why not try to produce her own mead? She looked it up—"a liquor of fermented honey and water,

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drunk a great deal in medieval times, often spiced or mulled." The medieval theme was uppermost in Penelope's mind at this time, for the pageant was being planned and she was charged with creating a menu of olde Englishe fayre for the grand banquet. Yes, she'd try making just one bottle—her gift for the top table to enjoy with sweetmeats after the feast.

Jack Bannister yawned as the last of the jugglers dropped his balls. He looked at his watch and adjusted the belt over his Old King Cole paunch; he was hungry, and he was conscious that some of the French were discreetly aghast at the English custom of downing alcohol in great quantities on an empty stomach. He himself hadn't touched so much as a dram all day, but he thought all had gone well and now he wanted a drink—after all, he had something to celebrate.

"Gentil ladies and good knights," he announced. "We have had a grand revels and I am mighty pleased that the little contretemps over the sack race has been sorted honourably, but revellers need sustenance to go forth tonight, and so methinks it is high time we all of us repaired to ye feasting table for a fair old tuck-in. What think you, Mistress Penelope?"

Penelope Haslet motioned agitatedly that feasting was fine by her and her team of serving swains and wenches, and had been since the suckling pigs came out of the oven an hour ago.

Everyone crowded into the marquee, where trestles and benches were lined up for the rabble, with the round table from the parish council chamber placed at the end for those above the salt, who of course included Jack and his faithful jester, Frank Spode.

Jack rather wished the place markers hadn't put Frank and his germs immediately next to him, but did not want to create ructions in front of the visiting French *maire* on his other side. The suckling pig was being served and all was jollity. Penelope fussed about in her wimple and pinny, making sure her professional reputation was secure, expressing motherly concern over the jester's state of health, and privately hoping he'd give her a bonus for this sterling advert for the Pug and Cushion's catering.

By this time Frank's belled hat had dropped and he'd given up the struggle to tease his audience with riddles culled from last year's crackers; of course the groaning response had had nothing to do with it—his voice had dwindled to little more than a croak.

"I've got just the thing for that husky throat," Penelope chivvied confidentially over her boss's shoulder. "I was keeping it specially

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for the noble party's sweet course, but it'll soothe your vocal cords and help your dinner go down if you take a swig right now."

She lifted the plastic-gemmed, gilt-sprayed goblet that was in front of him, and carefully poured a generous dosage of her golden mead.

"Ah," beamed Frank, trying in vain to sniff the bouquet through his clogged nose. He liked Penelope; she was far more caring about his ailments than Lobelia ever was. In fact, she was a much more sympathetic listener, and not bad looking either. Yes, he wouldn't mind retiring from the pub game if he had someone comforting like Penelope to look after him. Mmmm, he must get to work on that idea—Lobelia could take over the management of the pub after the divorce, she'd probably like that. So thinking, he smiled, lifting his goblet and toasting the worth of a good woman like Penelope.

"Here, wait a minute, that's the king's drinking vessel, my man, how dare ye sully the monarch's wassail with your pestilence?" quoth Jack, who with one smooth motion swept the chalice from the startled Frank's grasp before he could take a sip and drained it in three gulps.

"By willikins, Mistress Penelope, that's done me a power of good—pour me another, and serve one to *Monsieur Maire* here, too."

But the *maire* politely preferred to stick to burgundy, so after refilling Jack's vessel she rushed off to fetch an olde Englishe plastic cuppe for the sick jester, quite failing to see the toastmaster rising overenthusiastically to celebrate *l'entente cordiale*. His chair fell back into her path, she tumbled headlong into a passing swain whose metal serving platter flew from his grasp, landing under her bottle, which smashed in pieces, and the praised mead drained its last drop into the grass.

And so no one ever deduced what caused the dreadful illness that afflicted Jack Bannister, alone in his house in the dark hours of the morning after the revels. His stomach heaved, his pulse faltered, his muscles seized; in his confusion he dialled the Pug and Cushion instead of a doctor and Lobelia arrived just as his heart failed.

"He'd been so jolly, too, he fair stole the show from mopey Frank," said the villagers next day as they swept the gilt goblet with its last dregs into a sack full of litter. "Poor Jack." ●

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a *NEW* short story by

BARBARA OWENS

Some mystery writers set out deliberately to create a series and have ideas from the start about the possible evolution of their characters over time. The genesis of Barbara Owens's Skovich and Hacker series was quite different: She set out to write a single story about the amicable pair but has continued to hear their voices over the three years since. We hope it will be some time yet before they decide to stop speaking to her, because the stories that result are a warm and humorous addition to our lineup . . .

PERSONAL DEBTS

by BARBARA OWENS

Terry Hacker stood close beside the hospital bed, anxiously watching the unconscious face of his partner, Detective Hank Skovich. Hank's skin looked drawn and gray against the stark white linens. His mouth hung slightly open and Hacker shifted uncomfortably, wishing he could leave, just walk across the room and out the door. He hated hospitals, had spent more time inside them in the unpleasant line of duty than any man should have to. And there'd always been that nasty little realization that one day he might have to stand with Hank as he was now, or worse yet, beside a slab in the morgue. The possibility came with the job. He glanced up at the sickly salmon-colored walls closing in on him, and when he looked down again Hank's eyes were open and a wan smile was inching across his face.

"Hey, buddy," he murmured. Then his breath caught as a jolt of pain hit him and the smile disappeared. "You make me laugh and I'll kill you as soon as I'm able to get out of this bed."

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Swallowing his rush of relief, Hacker leaned over him and snarled, "Damn it, Hank, what's the matter with you? You realize what you just put me through? How long you been walking around with an appendix waiting to burst?"

Skovich smiled again, a sad, tired effort. "What do I know? I figured my gut was acting up more than usual. You know how my insides go at one another."

Hacker wasn't interested in excuses. He raged on. "One minute we're riding along, nice and easy, and the next you're doubled over like a jackknife, sweating bullets and screaming you're going to die. Scared the hell right out of me. Swear to God, a man has to be a nurse to partner with you. I never knew anyone had so many things go wrong." Out of steam, he finished plaintively, "Hank, you threw up on my shoes!"

Skovich passed an unsteady hand across his brow. "Yeah, I kind of remember that. Sorry. I owe you one. Feel free to throw up on my shoes any time you're in the mood."

Not mad anymore, Hacker grinned. "You're a mess. Who took care of you before I came along?"

"Nobody. That's why I'm a mess. And you got me here in the nick of time, they tell me," Skovich said. "Must've been a wild ride."

"Full out, siren all the way," Hacker said proudly. "I guess you could say I saved your life."

"I guess you could say it if you wanted to. Personally, I would probably be more humble."

Hacker shifted, glancing again at the drab room. "Well, I've got to get back on duty."

Skovich's eyes were clearing. "Wait a minute, what about the new case? We just got started on it and now it seems I'll be out of commission for a while."

Hacker sighed heavily. "I hear they're going to assign Petulak to it temporarily. Do I or don't I get all the luck?"

Skovich's lips twitched but he bit off the laugh before it could escape. "Sidewinder Sue? Don't get me wrong. She's a good cop, but . . ."

"But she thinks all men are pigs," Hacker finished.

"Well, they are. We all have to learn to live with it. It was His plan." Skovich waved a weak hand as Hacker shifted again. "Go on, get out of here. Leave me to suffer in peace. Besides, all the nurses are waiting out there to peek at my cute incision. But you better get back here tonight. I want to keep up with the case."

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Safely in the doorway, Hacker turned. "Say, did you hear the one about . . ."

Skovich tried to fight the belly laugh, but it won, and a satisfied Hacker marched off with his partner's pathetic moans echoing behind him.

"Okay, go over what we got so far." Skovich's head was propped up and he looked more like himself. Even the room looked better with the sun down.

Hacker pulled a chair bedside and propped his sneakers on the rail. Some of the boys from the squad room had visited in his absence, bearing less than tasteful gifts, and the place was beginning to take on a festive air. A baby doll lay tucked protectively into Skovich's elbow. Hacker had offered to remove it, but his partner gravely insisted that he needed to keep it close so they could bond.

"Now you understand you're not officially on the case anymore, so we're just throwing ideas around, right?" Hacker said. "Sidewinder won't like it if she finds out we're getting together on this. By the way, I think she's already in love with me."

Skovich shook his head. "You've got to get married, boy. You're beginning to get dangerous. So go on, hit me."

"Well, we've got an eighteen-year-old female goes out her apartment window around midnight. Seven stories to the alley below. Not discovered until almost morning. Nobody heard a thing. Could be an accident or suicide."

"I thought we'd already pretty much eliminated those possibilities."

"Yeah, but we still have to keep them in mind."

"Trust me," Skovich said. "It wasn't an accident and she's not the type for suicide."

"No argument from me. Okay, Annemarie Luchow. Immigrant parents. She dropped out of high school at sixteen because her parents didn't approve of her best friend. Father kicked her out and she moved in with said friend, also sixteen and a dropout. Friend got her a job at the dry cleaners where friend already worked. Annemarie's been there ever since. Quiet girl, shy, religious. No boyfriends, no apparent problems, no record. Described by everyone who knew her as sweet and naive. Very close to her family until the blowup, tight with the girlfriend since. So far absolutely nothing that points to a motive."

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Skovich nodded thoughtfully. "No signs of a break-in. No sexual assault." He nodded again. "Nothing missing but the roommate and the baby. What does that say to you?"

"Find the roommate."

"Right. Run her by me again."

"Carla Zabello. The two girls had been friends since grade school. Only child, broken home. Carla gets a little wild in high school, nothing serious. Lousy student but not a bad girl. Then she starts hanging out with Billy Sule, twenty-one. He's got a short sheet, mostly small stuff, malicious mischief, petty thievery. Quite a brawler, Billy is. Loves to fight. Carla apparently fell for him in a big way. Everyone I've talked to says Billy wants to be a big shot. Always after something that will bring him major bucks."

"Him and how many others," Skovich said. "Something hinky here. Carla quits her job and goes off with him about a year ago, then turns up back at Annemarie's recently with a baby and the girls seem tighter than ever. Now one of them's dead and the other's packed up and gone. Big puzzle piece missing."

"Yeah," Hacker agreed. "I've got to go out and find Carla."

Skovich pointed at the folder lying on the bed. "Let me see the Luchow picture again." When Hacker handed it over, Skovich studied it for a long time. "Look at that face," he said. "My gut tells me this was a good girl, Terry. She didn't deserve what she got."

"I know."

"Reminds me a little of Jess. Same chin, same big eyes."

Hacker remained silent. Hank didn't mention his daughter often, but the pain was still raw when he did. He glanced up, almost apologetically. "Jess is a little younger, of course. And she may look completely different than she did last time I saw her. That's been years."

Hacker didn't try to hide his resentment. "You could lean on your ex to send pictures. Or let the kid write to you."

Skovich handed the picture back. "Naw, she wants Jess to forget me. I don't know, maybe that's best."

His partner was saved from another unpleasant observation by the appearance of a nurse in the doorway. She was young and Nordic blond, and Hacker automatically sucked in his gut, bathing her in a wide smile.

"Sorry, you'll have to leave," she said with a dazzling smile of her own. "It's time to tuck this officer in for the night."

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Hacker stood up slowly, letting her get a good look at him. Skovich smirked painfully, holding his side. "Nurse Marta, my partner, Detective Hacker. Eat your heart out, Terry, this lady likes more seasoned men. Beat it. You've got work to do and I feel the need for medical attention."

Annemarie Luchow's mother was sedated, unable to speak with anyone. The father appeared broken, brimming over with guilt.

"If I had not ordered her from my house when she defied me, this would never have happened. She was too much influenced by that Carla, and I could not make her understand that I only wanted more for her than I had had myself. I am to blame for this, only me. I should have tried harder to make her understand."

He could not enlighten the detective as to Annemarie's life in the past two years. He had had no contact with her. The victim's brother George followed Hacker onto the small front stoop. At twenty-one George Luchow was a student at the local community college. He bore a striking resemblance to his dead sister.

"See, it's all about culture," he explained sadly. "My folks kept Annemarie too innocent, but they couldn't see that. She just wanted to be like Carla and the other girls her age, that's all."

"How well did you know Carla?"

"Well, she and Annemarie grew up together. Carla was always around. She's not a bad kid. She just made a mistake when she fell in with Billy Sule."

"Tell me about him."

"I don't know much. Just that he was kind of worthless. Never worked or did anything with his life. Spent all his time looking for the big score."

"Was he in with the drug crowd?"

"No, Billy didn't get involved with people. He worked alone."

"Did you see your sister much after she moved out?"

"Sometimes. I tried to keep an eye on her without my folks knowing. But she kind of shut me out after a while. Everything was Carla. Annemarie would do anything for her."

"Even after the baby?"

"Especially after the baby. My sister was extremely moral, Detective, but Carla was her best friend. And Carla needed her then, that's all Annemarie had to know."

"What happened between Carla and Billy, do you know? He kick her out?"

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"I can't tell you that. Annemarie stopped talking to me after Carla moved back in."

"You think maybe Billy came on to your sister and killed her when she turned him down?"

George Luchow looked thoughtful. "Anything's possible, of course, but that doesn't sound like Billy. He might have knocked her around a little, but I don't see Billy killing anyone unless there was something in it for him."

"Do you have any idea where I can find him or Carla?"

For the first time, tears shone in the younger man's eyes. "Look, don't you know I'd be one of the first to tell you if I did? It's my kid sister who's dead, remember?"

Back in the squad room, Hacker and Susan Petulak compared notes. Sidewinder had been unable to find any trace of Carla Zabello and her baby. If friends or family knew, they weren't talking. And nobody lived at Billy Sule's last known address.

"Damn," Hacker said. "Where could they be?"

Petulak glared at him. "Wherever, we've got to find them," she snapped. "Billy's the key here. Has to be. All men are pigs."

Hacker got a frantic message from Skovich: "I'll give you a hundred dollars to bring me a meatball sandwich when you come tonight. They're trying to kill me with gruel in here."

In the hospital lobby, Hacker also purchased a single yellow rose and stopped off at the nurse's station on Hank's floor to present it to the knockout nurse. Her last name was Lindstrom, he learned, and she smiled when he informed her its delicate color reminded him of her.

"How nice. But it smells like Italian meatballs."

He clutched the greasy bag tighter under his arm and turned up the brilliance of his smile. "Just look the other way, okay? He's an old man—he'll be dead before long anyway. He just turned forty, you know."

Marta Lindstrom laughed. "And you'd be?"

"Twenty-nine. In my prime. Better catch me before it's too late."

"I'll have to think about it. Thanks for the rose, but tell Hank to get rid of that sandwich before the head nurse smells it. She's not a delicate flower like me."

He was still worrying about her usage of Skovich's first name when he walked into the room and his partner lunged for the deli bag.

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"Saved, saved! As soon as they sent my roomie home today and I had the place to myself, I knew I had to get in touch with you. Nobody caught on?"

"Only half the hospital," Hacker said. "I had comatose patients leaping from their beds and chasing me down the hall."

"I'll eat, you talk," Skovich ordered, savoring his first mouthful with a sigh.

Hacker recounted his visit with the Luchow family and Sidewinder's vain attempts to get a lead on Carla or Billy. "Then I went back to the dry-cleaning shop. Annemarie was everyone's favorite there. Hard worker, pleasant to everyone, so honest that she even went to a customer's house after work once when she'd made a mistake and short-changed him."

"See?" Skovich said fondly. "I was right about her. A good girl."

"They run a nice little neighborhood shop. Lots of regulars. Everyone knows everyone else and where they live. I wouldn't mind working there myself."

Skovich grunted sourly. "Keep it in mind if you screw up this case."

Hacker recognized the signs. He shook his head. "This is going to be one of your personal debt cases, isn't it? The girl got to you."

Skovich took a minute before answering. "Terry, I stood over her body. I saw what somebody did to her. Yeah, I owe her. *We* owe her. All right?"

"All right."

"So how did the shop feel about Carla?"

"They liked Carla okay. Said she was a lot more reliable when Billy wasn't around. Every time she and he got back together Carla turned flaky. Then she finally quit for good and didn't go back when the baby came."

"I forget," Skovich said, chewing fervently. "Do we know what model that baby is?"

Hacker checked his notes. "Girl. Don't know the name. Nobody saw much of it. Carla didn't go out a lot after she moved back in with Annemarie."

"We got a picture of it?"

"Of what? The baby?"

"Yeah, the baby."

"Is that important?"

"I don't know. It's just a loose end and I don't like loose ends."

"Naw, we don't have one."

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Skovich narrowed his eyes. "You want to know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking you need to go back to that apartment and look at it again. Get a real feel for it. There's something waiting to be noticed somewhere, has to be."

"Okay."

Before he left, Hacker had to know why Nurse Marta was calling Skovich by his first name, so he asked.

His partner smiled mysteriously. "She's seen me naked. What more can I say?"

Hacker was so miffed he didn't even try to make Hank laugh before he stalked out of the room.

The small apartment was too quiet, like most death scenes revisited. It was cramped and sparsely furnished, grim views of other windows from the one where Annemarie fell. A single bedroom and a hide-a-bed in the living room. Hacker felt sure Annemarie was the kind of girl who gave Carla and the baby the bedroom when they moved back in. Now mother and daughter were nowhere in evidence. Not one extra toothbrush, not a stray baby bottle or can of talcum to be found. He longed to know what had happened here. From what he'd heard so far, Annemarie Luchow was almost too good to be true. If that was the case, then why would someone want to murder her? It bothered him to see an empty pan waiting on the old gas stove and the unopened can of soup on the counter beside it. Annemarie had chosen split pea. It wasn't fair that she hadn't had the chance to eat it.

Armed with Carla's high school yearbook photo and a mug shot of Billy Sule, Hacker made the rounds of neighbors again. A few had seen Carla and her baby only occasionally. The infant was described as well behaved, round-faced, with a halo of reddish hair. No one knew its name or remembered seeing Billy. He was told that Annemarie was pleasant and quiet, and that she kept to herself, especially after Carla and the baby returned. Tenants in the building across the alley, with windows facing Annemarie's apartment, recalled seeing the girls sometimes, but no one saw a man. And no one heard a thing on the night Annemarie died.

Hacker went to see Carla Zabello's mother. She looked flashy and tired, and she blew smoke in his face with every breath.

"I already told you people everything I know," she said. "I gave up on her when she got so hung up on Billy. She's not a bad kid, you understand, but he was her blind spot, and I guess I can't fault

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her for that. No female in my family has any sense when it comes to men."

"She and Annemarie were unusually close, weren't they?" Hacker asked.

"Like sisters. I kind of hoped Annemarie would hold Carla down as they grew up, but she wasn't strong enough. She'd just go along with whatever Carla wanted to do." Her eyes watered. "Annemarie—poor kid."

"Mrs. Zabello, if you knew where Carla or Billy were, would you tell me?"

"Mister, I would." Her gaze was direct and Hacker believed her. "But I haven't even spoken to her for over a year. I never even saw that baby."

"And you're convinced Billy's the father?"

"I don't know who else it would be. She couldn't see anyone but him."

He searched out an acquaintance or two of Billy's and made no progress in learning his whereabouts.

"And don't bother to go looking for friends, man," he was told. "He didn't have friends. Billy lived only for Billy."

Skovich was sitting up in bed, his ruddy color returning, when Hacker arrived at the hospital that evening. Hacker handed over the requested chili dogs and settled back to give his report. Skovich listened intently.

"Sidewinder hit the dry cleaner's again," Hacker finished. "Annemarie didn't confide much to the people she worked with, but a couple of them got the impression that there was some tension between her and Billy."

"Well, sure," Skovich said. "They both wanted dibs on Carla."

"I even got a little weird and started wondering if the baby was Annemarie's and Carla was covering for her. That would explain a suicide if Annemarie couldn't handle the shame. But then I came to my senses and realized Annemarie would have had to hide her pregnancy from the people she worked with, gone home one evening and conveniently given birth, then gone back to work the next day. Of course, I knew all along the coroner's report said Annemarie was a virgin."

"Of course she was," Skovich said sternly. "No, there's a link missing here and we've got to find it."

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"But we have to watch ourselves, Hank," Hacker cautioned. "We'll lose our edge if we start getting too involved with this girl."

Skovich ignored him. "You check around for doctors who might have tended Carla during her pregnancy?"

"Yeah. No go. No one knew the name or recognized the picture."

Chili dogs forgotten, Skovich thought for several minutes. "You know what I don't like?" he said finally. "The can of soup. That soup bothers me. Unless the coroner's wrong, Annemarie died around midnight. Yet her stomach was almost empty. She hadn't eaten for hours. Why not? What time did she get off work that night?"

Hacker checked his voluminous notes. "Seven. Possibly a little after because it was her night to close up. But you're right—she would still have been home by eight. Easy."

"You'd be pretty hungry by eight, wouldn't you? So why didn't she eat?"

"Some kind of interruption? Carla leaving. Or maybe she had company."

Skovich nodded. "I like the idea of company. But not somebody she'd offer to share her soup with. No one close. Someone who came and stayed awhile."

"And there's no sign that Carla and the baby ate anything that night," Hacker offered. "No dirty dishes, no wet dishcloth. Nothing in the trash."

Skovich leaned forward suddenly, wincing as a pain reminded him where he was. "Okay, then let's assume Carla and the baby were already gone when she got home. Moved out while she was at work. Now we know that Annemarie didn't have a boyfriend, and she wouldn't let a stranger in the door. And she wasn't that friendly with the neighbors. Who does that leave?"

"Billy," Hacker agreed readily. "But where's the rest of it? Sure, he and Annemarie didn't like each other much, but why would he want to kill her?"

Skovich threw up his hands in disgust. "You still don't understand this partner bit, do you? You're supposed to come up with something, too. Where does it say I have to do all the work?"

Hacker took a deep breath. "Okay, you asked for it. I've been getting a wild idea. Hear me out. Now we've pretty much ruled out Carla as the killer. She had easiest access, but we don't see a motive there and she also had a baby to contend with. She couldn't kill Annemarie and then put everything together to get the baby and herself out of there. Too much time and fuss involved—the body

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might be discovered before she could get away. So listen to this. Something about the whole baby business has been eating at me. Here's a girl with a new baby and she doesn't want anyone to see it or even know its name. I don't care if the kid's not legal, nowadays that doesn't mean squat. Lead me to a new mother who doesn't try to show off her little darling every chance she gets."

Skovich said, "Uh-huh."

"Then when I heard today that the kid has reddish hair, it hit me. Look at this." He dug out the pictures of Carla and Billy. "Look at that hair. Black as night, both of them, and olive skin, too. Now you tell me if I'm crazy, but I got a big fat notion that the kid isn't theirs."

Skovich stared at the pictures for several minutes without blinking. Then he let out a soft whistle. "You're not crazy, my friend, there's a real brain behind that pretty face. That's it—I'd bet my pension on it. Those two snatched that baby and Annemarie was going to squeal."

It was a long shot, but suddenly everything seemed to fit. Billy Sule's grandiose plans to hit it big, Carla's blind devotion to him, and everyone said Annemarie would do anything for Carla. Correction—almost anything. The partners spent a long feverish hour working out a detailed time line on paper, and when it was finished they leaned back sweating and grinning.

"I don't know how we'll prove it, but we got it," Hank exulted. "Even if she was pregnant when she quit the dry cleaner's, Carla didn't have time enough to have a kid who's already sitting up, like the neighbors say she was. That kid's stolen and we've got our motive."

"Right. Carla had to move back to Annemarie's because Billy was smart enough to know it was too hot staying with him. Cops knock on Billy's door from time to time. But I don't know why they've waited so long to hit the parents for ransom."

"Maybe they have," Skovich said. "We don't know who the child belongs to. Or maybe Billy botched it somehow. Or Annemarie started making noises and they had to try to keep her in line. Well, what are you still sitting here for? Get out there and find out!"

Hacker met the gorgeous nurse, Marta Lindstrom, as he streaked down the hall. Probably on her way to Hank's room. He prided himself on giving her only a small impersonal smile.

* * *

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Sidewinder found some parents with a missing child. Their name was Murray and they lived within a dozen blocks of Annemarie's apartment. Their infant daughter, Sara, had been eleven weeks old when she was stolen from her mother's grocery cart in the middle of a busy supermarket. Mrs. Murray provided them with an early picture of her daughter. Sara Murray was round-faced and bore a wispy crown of reddish hair. Her mother's eyes filled when she talked about it.

"Ten seconds. I turned away for no more than that and she was gone. The guilt is killing me. Please, please find her for me."

Hacker's stomach knotted when the woman revealed during questioning that she was a regular patron at Carla's dry cleaning shop. She knew both girls. Carla had even teased her for being such a creature of habit that she always did her grocery shopping on the same day of the week.

"You have to understand that this child may not be Sara," he tried to impress upon her. "But I swear to you we won't give up until we know for sure."

Back in the car, he was surprised when Sidewinder reached over and gave his thigh a friendly punch. "You were pretty good in there, Terry," she told him. "Like you really understood that woman's pain. I was impressed."

He threw out his chest. "Well, I guess you just never realized before what a sensitive guy I am."

The two men hunched together at the edge of the bed, Skovich's pale hairy legs dangling over its side.

"Carla's our key here," he muttered. "But how the hell do we find her?"

"You think there's a possibility she doesn't know Annemarie's dead? If I read Billy right, he's got her stashed somewhere deep. Carla's a flake, but the girls were really close for years. It might bring her out if she knew."

Skovich nodded thoughtfully. "It's worth a try. Run it by the captain and see what he says about pumping up the media."

It went on overkill—newspapers, radio, and TV—and on the first day of expanded coverage Hacker got a phone call late in the afternoon.

"This is Carla Zabello," a woman's choked voice rushed out at him. "God, I didn't know—he said he was only going to scare her."

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She whispered an address. "Come get me. He's not here right now, but hurry up, hurry up!"

The bottle of Hank's favorite cheap gin sloshed pleasantly against his ribs under his jacket as Hacker marched into the hospital. It was Saturday morning and all was right with the world. Skovich was dressed, seated in his bedside chair. Hacker filled the paper cups he'd brought along and the partners knocked them back.

"I'll tell you, it was beautiful," Hacker related with relish. "Carla had the baby with her and we were waiting inside Billy's own front door when he showed up. Piece of cake. He's a real piece of work, Billy is. He wasn't going to ransom that baby, Hank, he was going to sell it! Had a buyer all lined up and poor dumb Carla conned out of her skull. Made it sound like no one would get hurt, so he got her to case the customers at the dry cleaner's, pick the kid, and do the snatch. Never dirtied his own sweet hands."

Skovich shook his head. "And now she has to take a fall, too."

Hacker filled the cups again. "Hey, she deserves it and she knows it. Just knows it too late, that's all. Carla doesn't think things through. She had Annemarie talked into going along for a while, but the longer that baby was around the more Annemarie got cold feet and wanted to give it back. Finally got to the point where she threatened to blow the whistle, so Billy cleared Carla and the kid out and went over to talk some sense into her."

"Some sense," Skovich said sadly.

"Yeah, I know. But I think Annemarie would be happy to know the baby is in her mom's and dad's arms today. All because of her."

"She paid a damned high price for doing the right thing," Skovich said.

"We can't do anything about that and you know it."

"You're right." Skovich managed a satisfied smile. "And Billy's going away for a nice long rest from crime. I hope Annemarie knows that."

"Me too." Hacker sighed. "Lots of victims in this one. The Murrays, the baby, even Carla. And Annemarie. But the debt's paid, Hank." He raised his cup. "Come on. To Annemarie."

Skovich hoisted his. "To Annemarie."

"Well, this is a pretty sight," Marta Lindstrom said from the doorway. "Guzzling in a hospital room. Put that away before somebody sees you." But she twinkled at them. "And I'll see *you* tonight, Hank."

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"What? What?" Hacker said as she walked away.

"I'm going home today," Skovich answered nonchalantly. "And she's coming over tonight to cook for me. I'm still a very sick man."

Hacker sneered. "Yeah, right. But not too sick for a little Hank-y panky, I'll bet."

Skovich's gin went up his nose when he started to laugh, and a pitiful cry of pain broke from him as he struggled not to cough.

Hacker grinned, unconcerned. "Got to give you credit for landing a good one, though. Now me, I've been asked out by Sidewinder tonight. Just imagine what *I've* got to look forward to."

Skovich stared at him. *"She* asked *you?"* he wheezed.

"Didn't ask. Insisted," was the smug reply. "She thinks I was brilliant on this case."

Skovich clutched his arm. "Just don't let her hurt you," he implored. "I've about gotten you broken in good. I don't want to have to get a new partner or identify the remains of the old one."

As soon as Skovich felt up to it, the partners took themselves out for a serious celebration, and before the evening was over Hacker managed to collect on a personal debt of his own. He threw up on Skovich's shoes.

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In nearly all Mr. van de Wetering's stories, his concern for the environment shines through. He lives in Surry, Maine, where, he tells us, he is sometimes visited by bears . . .

MANGROVE MAMA

by JANWILLEM VAN DE WETERING

Jamy is kind of foolish but I didn't think that he would kill his girlfriend Mangrove Mama. Still, Jamy said he did, staring at me with his twelve-year-old eyes. Jamy is close to forty, but spiritually retarded. He killed, he said, Mangrove Mama by kicking her in her pregnant belly. Unintentionally of course. He just happened to be emotionally upset at the time, and stoned on cocaine somewhat.

Circumstances have inadvertently come about making me Guardian of this key. This key is Egret Key, Florida, temporary heaven for the wealthy. Why me? I think a Guardian was needed and I look like I could fill the vacancy. Nobody, of course, except soliciting TV preachers and fighting mullahs, ever dares look angels in the face, but if Nobody runs into me, Nobody might confuse this kindly and harmless old face with that of an incarnate venerable power.

Hi! Jannie is the name. I was born in the Netherlands town of Rotterdam, emigrated along with my parents, made out okay as a small-time real-estate tycoon in Boston.

Long years ago I retired here, on my acre estate facing Egret Cove and, on the horizon, Eagle Island. I came with my dear wife, who never liked me but got used to me, but she died, and my dear Parrot, who never got used to me but learned to like me.

Lately Parrot no longer screeches when we meet but snuggles up on my shoulder, probes and nibbles my ear, and gently, ever so gently, does his piped-down imitation of the neighbor's dog yapping.

"Arf arf arf," Parrot goes softly, then pants: "huh huh huh," then breathes in sharply. I stiffen in fear, for a parrot's close-by screech easily punctures human ears, but no, Parrot's final chorus is a melodious "arf arf arf" again.

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Parrot was into his doggie act while drunken Jamy again admitted to doing away with long-legged high-breasted beautiful Mangrove Mama, mother of his unborn child.

"That's not good, Jamy," I agreed, pouring bourbon. We had dined on chewy stone crabs, served with butter and French bread, followed by fluffy Key lime pie and Cuban coffee. We puffed Dominican cigars. "Then what happened?" I asked.

Then, Jamy explained, Bad George, his skipper, and Sopwith, his servant, shouted, "Oooh" and "Aaaah."

The scene? Eagle Island, where Jamy resides in a look-alike T'ang Dynasty Buddhist temple, partly raised above a lagoon. Dolphins dally while Jamy dines. All of Eagle Island—after Jamy, three years back, had it razed of any wildlife—was arranged by Zen architect "Goldy" Yamamoto for a cool million or two. The resulting luxury is grossly overdone, even along fabulous key standards.

I avoid Eagle Island now. Its human refabrication looks distasteful to me. Inside the building an endless expanse of pastel-colored walls surround furniture carved out of elephant tusks upholstered with snow tiger skins. Jamy runs a wooden-spoked 1920 Lincoln convertible on his few miles of hot-topped highway. The temple's drive is lined with helicopter-transported, elegantly peeling mahogany trees, ever-blossoming frangipani, and a carefully guided banyan hedge, doubling yearly in size. Jamy's marina is decorated by a row of symmetrically placed traveler palms; fan-shaped trees waving welcomes. Life-size plastic pelicans, herons, ospreys, even —damn the dear boy's soul—bald eagles, perch on curved gates and flared roofs. An Olympic swimming pool is walled in by giant mirrors, the nine-hole golf link is freshened by piped-in dollar-a-gallon water. Servant Sopwith climbs the coconut palm grove to pick giant nuts that might smash Jamy's dear head when he hammocks down underneath, composing poetry.

. . . one evening, dancing on Mallory Square
meeting my luv, luv, LUVVV. . . .

Leatherbound copies of the completed poem, handprinted on parchment, will be distributed to select recipients some day soon. That includes me. Oh, Jamy is indeed a dear boy, though irritating at the best of times. If I could show you his Yamamoto kitchen, with walls lined by stainless-steel counters and floors of genuine marble, complete with a display of culinary machinery (kept spotless by Sopwith), including a cakery and a puddingery . . . and what does

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Jamy normally have for dinner? A TV tray, zipped in by Bad George on the speedboat. No wonder Jamy likes to drop in at my place, and if I happen to be broiling fresh snapper or another fine marine-deli Egret Cove provides during my daily outing in the rowboat, well now, seeing that Jamy considers himself to be a friend, he may sit down and dig in vigorously.

I'm stuck here in my old house, bought long before the keys became fashionable. I dread the growl of Jamy's powerboat covering the distance between Eagle Island and my shore in mere minutes. I never have time to get away. I fear Jamy's repetitive monologues, leaving headaches for Parrot to smooth away with more "arf-arf huh-huh arf," but I almost forgave Jamy when he presented me with his murder.

How exciting. Kicked Mangrove Mama in the belly, did he now? And in the presence of mutinous slave Sopwith and jealous former pal Bad George?

Aha!

If my fellow key-sians project divine qualities onto my humble presence, I may as well use that free glory. Besides, I enjoy manipulating the multitude, and I suddenly saw, while Jamy sobbed and slobbered, a chance to work some things out.

So what have we here? I'll tell you what we have here: a delightful set of circumstances, pointing toward planetary improvement.

Let me provide some background here.

Before our Florida keys became a maddening, overpopulated, tourist-trappy bozo-bonanza, Eagle Island was one of many raised mangrove swamps that attract birds. Weren't the silver-gray pelicans that its wildness supported a great sight as they delicately glided about before noisily nosediving for their daily fish? White herons displayed themselves too, and slate-colored egrets, some iridescent ibises, a charming bunch of little sandpipers, and, of course, the lone turkey vulture on everlasting patrol, but I was mainly fascinated by a pair of bald eagles. Bald eagles are spectacular beings, rare, an endangered species.

Jamy shot those two eagles.

How do I know? Because he told me, at another after-dinner session, also bourbon-related.

I believe the eagle-murder, as the Suspect was properly motivated that time. Killing harmless wildlife is what self-centered dear boys do, especially when they are rich and extra-damned by prolonged parental absence during early formative years.

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What proper motivation?

Vanity. Jamy originally bought Eagle Island to show off. He wasn't contented with sharing a regular key with other happy folks, no, he needed an entire island all to himself. Then "Goldy" Yamamoto meets Jamy in a Key West strip joint and Yamamoto turns out to be a specialist in architecting antique Chinese surroundings. A contract is signed forthwith, but before bulldozers dash out of landing craft to shred the island's flora, our conspirators check out the area and observe nesting eagles.

Nesting eagles interfere with the granting of building permits.

Jamy, sniffed full of cocaine, boards his super speedboat, shoulders his twelve-gauge automatic, zooms out on Egret Cove, and blasts two rare eagles—nine-foot wingspan, immaculate white heads and tails, beautiful specimens indeed. Didn't I watch and admire them many a morning, roosting so quietly on their nest tucked high in the mangroves?

BLAM! BLAM!

Jamy shoots the ibises and the pelicans, too, for good measure.

Zen architect Yamamoto submits his plans to Egret Key's planning board. I was away at the time. My fellow members saw no reason to refuse the request. They checked the island but there were no endangered life forms around—nobody but us ducks and cormorants, both still plentiful species.

You wonder how I could feed Jamy my fine dinners after he told me what he did to beautiful birds?

Sages stay cool.

Permit me more outline of background.

Jamy's father made millions in oil, skin, high-rise, and other Texanias of the highflying days. Jamy's mother, meanwhile, was made by macho men.

Jamy himself decorated his handsome head with a garland of bluebonnets, dropped out of everything, and surfaced in our capital, Key West. Like that most independent little city itself, "the unwanted child seemed to welcome parental neglect."

I surmise he was happy here during these footloose years. In spite of all bad habits, Jamy is still attractive today; in his youth he was surely stunning. He met Mangrove Mama, a perfect mate, an unmatched package of Lorelei-like sex. There were other members of the tribe: gangling Bad George, peddling dope, and nerdy Sopwith, attracted to serving German gents. We are talking flower children here, latter-day hippies, making a dollar if they had to,

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mostly hanging out in far-out space, drunk, doped, no need for sense.

. . . One evening, dancing in Mallory Square. . . .

Jamy, part-time kitchenscrape, pimped a bit on waitress Mangrove Mama hooking lone tourists on the side. A good time, no doubt, was had by all.

Another sunset comes along and sees our gang dancing again to guitars strummed by Cuban and Haitian refugees, with New York poets going crazy on bongos.

The same sunset, a short while earlier, saw Jamy's dad having a terminal heart attack in his 1958 white Cadillac (only eight thousand instant collector's items sold). The car careens wildly between San Antonio and Austin, slips on the highway, projectiles through a row of model homes. Salesmen and their customers jump off balconies and hurt themselves. Jamy, Sr., is dead throughout the rampage.

The same sunset, a less short while earlier, filtering through plastic blinds in a Montana motel, saw Jamy's mom, a wispy woman, squeezed away by an overenthusiastic trucker.

Orphan Jamy is rich.

Now what does he do?

For a while Jamy gets going on the togetherness idea. He shares his fortune. Mama immediately crashes the Jaguar Jamy buys her as a token of communal bondage. Sopwith pulls a four-cylinder Honda motorcycle over on himself while trying to be Early Marlon Brando. Bad George, in his role as Popeye, loses a pricey yacht off Bimini due to gusting wind and open portholes. All together they wreck a mansion by knocking down supporting walls to create undivided space. Eager to economize, Bad George and Sopwith use communal funds to buy a used school bus. While restoring the rustbucket, fifty gallons of old gas are drained into a city sewer. Better burn that dirty gas. A dropped match causes bad explosions. The city presents a bill for new concrete. In none of the above calamities was any insurance taken out. Jamy, while settling claims, protests, not so much about accumulated losses but because nobody pays respect. He dismantles the commune.

Not having learned to sit still yet, he rushes into more trouble.

Jamy is buying properties to impress others, who are impressed until the closings. Jamy is also stood up by dates. His dates think he is crazy. They're mostly women he meets in bars. Jamy tells

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them what properties he owns, scribbling additions of bonds, shares, warrants, bullion, cash reserves in foreign currencies, on napkins. He invites his newfound partners for rides on the *QE II* and *Concorde*. They don't show up at appointed places. He can't figure why.

Mangrove Mama is having a hard time too. She is in her addictive stage. Trading sex for drugs doesn't work for her. She is raped in a van and dumped on a beach. A disturbed lover tosses her clothes out of a window of a not good hotel. There are other bizarre events that she doesn't remember too well but police keep showing up to ask odd questions. To escape incomprehensible hassle Mama finds a canoe and paddles between the outer keys where an abandoned cocaine cruiser offers refuge. She starts living on seaweed and raw fish.

Bad George crews on a flying transport of Mexican marijuana. The old crate crashes in the Everglades. He is ambulanced to jail.

Sopwith is riding blue rented bicycles with lone male Germans again but no tourist wants to keep him. Sopwith branches into gardening, feeding heavy palm fronds into noisy chippers. He cheats on his hours and keeps getting fired.

Now, really, don't we agree that these children need a Guardian's help?

Except for Mangrove Mama, blond Lorelei siren gone wild and canoeing about Egret Cove, I haven't met any of these kids yet. Mama and I get on good. I take gourmet lunches out to her cruiser at times.

Now we get the goings-on on Eagle Island. I discover, to my grief and fury, that the eagles have disappeared. The island is stripped of its mangroves, Yamamoto builds his infernal temple mansion, Jamy moves in.

Jamy and I meet on the cove, where I yell at him when his powerboat's wake nearly overturns my dinghy. The dear boy's profuse apologies instigate my wining and dining the scoundrel.

Mostly unemployed Sopwith and paroled Bad George are gardening for me at the time and Jamy meets them on the premises. He hires them away respectively as the butler and captain, assuring his former friends that there will be no more Mr. Nice Guy.

Sopwith drops in occasionally to complain about his master keeping him and Bad George at long arm's lengths. I hear about Mangrove Mama also trying to reestablish her relationship with Jamy but only succeeding in staying occasional nights.

* * *

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So much for history. I hope I succeeded in sketching out relevant lines of cause and effect. Now let's see where they cross each other. Maybe their meeting points will indicate a more pleasant picture than that of Mangrove Mama's bleeding corpse.

I tipped the bottle again and handed out more cigars. Key lime pie rested easily on glowingly digesting stone crabs. I could feel Parrot's little dry feet moving about on my shoulder. "Arf arf," the bird murmured sleepily. Another lovely evening under the palm trees enjoyed by friends.

"Kicked Mangrove Mama to death, eh?" I asked. "Now run that by me again, Jamy. Keep nothing back."

Jamy got up, postured and gestured. There he stood again at the scene of the crime, at the side of his lagoon, and there Mama's begging sharp fingers plucked annoyingly at his sleeve. She wanted to stay the night. He didn't want her to stay the night. He wanted to listen to New Age compact disks on the sound system that Bad George installed and that Sopwith explained.

"Arf arf huh-huh-huh. . . ."

Dear Parrot.

"And then you kicked Mama?" I asked.

Jamy said he remembered pushing Mama, watching her fall, seeing lots of blood on the floor.

"But did you *kick* her?"

Jamy couldn't recall. Bad George claimed Jamy kicked her, and Sopwith likewise, so sure Jamy kicked Mama. Here we had two sober witnesses and Jamy, the perpetrator, brimful of coke.

"You were woozy, dear boy?"

Jamy admitted to having sniffed away for a while, preparing proper reception of New Age jazz on his new CDs.

"You remember pushing Mama?"

He did.

"You don't remember kicking her?"

He did not. Sure? Sure. He did remember the blood, though, lots of blood, coming from underneath Mama, who was losing her baby because Jamy had kicked her. Jamy's baby. So said Sopwith and Bad George, later.

"Mama had told you she was pregnant?"

She had not.

"So how could she lose the baby? Your baby? Why *your* baby?"

Jamy said he had been sleeping with Mama at times.

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I said that Mama is over forty now. Forty-year-old women are known to get pregnant sometimes, but what with Mama's frugal life-style, canoeing about all day, living on seaweed and raw fish . . .

"Have you ever made any woman pregnant?" I asked.

He said that, ah, now that I mentioned it, ah, no. . . .

"Now Mama dies," I said. "We have her on your marble tiles next to the lagoon in the Zen lounge, and she dies."

No, no, Jamy said I got that wrong. Mama was alive then, but very sick, bleeding, and he was stoned, quite incapable of dealing with the situation. However, Bad George and Sopwith were sober and able, so he ordered them to take Mama to Key West Hospital to get her fixed up. Bad George said hospitals don't take in single women that bleed, not without money. Jamy shelled out money.

"How much?"

A thousand dollars, Jamy said. While he got the cash Bad George and Sopwith wrapped Mama up in a blanket, lowered her into the powerboat—off shoots the rescue party into the dark night. The speedboat planes on the small waves of Egret Cove, the roar of its twin outboards recedes in the black expanse.

"You stayed home, Jamy?"

Yep, he said. Jamy hates blood and he hates suffering women. There were still the new CDs to listen to. While Mangrove Mama got fixed up by modern medicine Jamy planned to relax on the intake of smooth wide-spaced New Age sounds, cresting his spiritual energy, to be telepathized to Mama so that she would get better pronto. She didn't get better pronto. She died before she reached the hospital's shore. Bad George and Sopwith brought the body back, still wrapped securely in the bloody blanket. Mama's long blond hair hung out at one end and her dead feet at the other. An unbearable sight, which made Jamy switch off his sound equipment.

"Where's the body, Jamy?" I asked, but I had to go on hold. Jamy was off in alcoholickies. He shuffled around my chair, flailing his arms, wailing his lament. How he loved Mangrove Mama, Jamy lamented, how he wished to make repairs, to her, to all, to everything. The world was going to wrack and ruin, and he had been playing with his millions, adding to destructive waste and pollution, adding to the ozone hole—while he could have been another Saint Jean-Jacques Cousteau, captaining a Greenpeace cruiser with Mama as his mate, torpedoing Japanese whaling vessels, or flying a glider plane on solar energy, patrolling Russian nuclear-waste

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sites that interfere with the supply of chanterelle mushrooms that could feed New York bag ladies.

"Yes," I said, "yes."

While helping Parrot, who had had enough, too, into his cage—the tired little thing almost dropped off my hand—I switched to analysis.

Was it the French novelist Stendhal who said that successful businessmen make good philosophers for they dare to see things clearly? Moneymakers see what goes on, rather than what they would like to see go on, and profit by accepting bad truths.

What would I like to see go on? Justice, of course. Let's have Jamy in irons, pulling weeds at the side of the road, while a sadistic wad-chewing Southern guard gestures with a shotgun.

While another rich fool lolls about Eagle Island. Jamy, no-good slob, miserable half-wit, look at him blabbermouthing away . . .

Egret Key's Guardian forces himself to stay calm, benevolent, benignly detached, while he works harder on himself. Yes, even angels are tempted, but I wasn't about to join Lucifer. Not until the move suited me, that is.

"Did you throw the corpse into the sea?" I asked. My breathing became a tad irregular. This was the question on which my solution hinged.

"Had Mama buried," Jamy sobbed.

"Where, dear boy?"

"On Bad George's Pissing Rock," Jamy sobbed.

Better, much better. The little clump of riprap, overgrown by poisonous Florida holly and acid-dropping cottonwood trees, is about halfway between Eagle Island and my house. We named it after Bad George began using it for sanitary stops, interrupting his ferrying across the cove.

"Let's go have a look," I said.

Jamy, worn out by his groveling, slept on my walnut floor. I poured out my watering can's contents. He whimpered but got up.

Parrot woke. "Arf?"

"No, you stay home, little friend." I found a spade, dragged Jamy to my dock, and dumped him into the rowboat. Jamy clawed my knees. "Please Jannie, let Mangrove Mama be."

He stayed in the boat, slumped over, head in hands, while I dug. Bad George and Sopwith had done a good job, she was six feet under rocks and rubble, but she wasn't Mangrove Mama. I thought I recognized the old girl. On the far side of Egret Cove an ever-changing

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colony of squatters exists on a flotilla of dying vessels. This woman once lifted a bottle at me as I rowed by, while suggesting a carnal meeting. I constructed a theory that fit all the facts. Drunk again, she fell in and drowned. Her body bobbed about that fateful night and drifted afoul of Bad George, Sopwith, and Mangrove Mama's ship.

My flashlight revealed Mangrove Mama's blond locks, cleverly braided into the dead woman's matted hair. Who had gone to such grisly trouble? Mama was supposedly ill. Squeamish Sopwith? While Bad George stood over him, raising a threatening fist? I had to smile as I imagined the scene: the lapping of the waves, owls hooting, the flutter of bats' wings, eerie sounds that accompany Sopwith's feeble protest. His squeak sounds like Stan Laurel's thin crying, and Bad George, who sports a bowler hat and who has put on weight, is the pathetic introvert's unrelenting Oliver Hardy. Mangrove Mama stars as the beautiful woman that paired comics need to use for contrast.

I bowed to the dead body, shoveled the rubble back, stamped the grave tight again, got back in my dinghy.

"How is Mama?" Jamy asked.

"Just fine," I said. We rowed to my house in silence. I put Jamy up in the guest room. The next morning, while watching me eat breakfast, Jamy stirred in his cloud of cigarette smoke and suggested that I should hold his hand while he gave himself up to the sheriff.

"No need," I said. "I can save you, dear boy, on certain conditions."

Jamy, properly awed, whispered, "You can bring Mangrove Mama back to life?"

"Why not?" Egret Key's sage asked his unenlightened disciple.

A glimmer of hope made the blood in Jamy's eyes glow.

As I said, my neighbors credit me with certain powers. It's this infernal New Age. We have all sorts of rich self-appointed spiritualists here and the general trend is to force growth of soul. Most seekers on this shore aim for Buddhahood, so in order to flavor the general quest I profess to be into Tao.

Taoists, apart from walking the nameless road named Tao, perform tricks. Local legend points at my pool that "magically mirrors the spirit"; my age-old hibiscus tree, "a set-off point for jumping astrally into space"; my barbecue rack, "alchemic instrument for preparing invisibility potions." My age is guessed at one hundred plus. Being born in Europe, I am credited with remembering World

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War I and the Belgian freedom struggle. I will, if pressed, confirm that I studied Tantric Lamaism with the Tsarist spy Gurdjieff in Kum Bum Monastery, Tibet. On a recent Smithsonian-sponsored visit to New Guinea I acquired a skull drum that accompanies my full-moon Penobscot Indian dances. I often chant Dutch children's rhymes and I can juggle telephone books in the W.C. Fields manner. No wonder Jamy wanted to believe me.

"Jamy," I said, "you did foully, egotistically, and ignorantly, which are three sides of the same coin, murder a pair of magnificent eagles, at least four endangered pelicans, and a rare group of ibises in order to take over their island. You are a true tyrant ape. I can give you Mangrove Mama again but must insist on your speedy evolution."

Jamy drooled and mumbled.

"Okay?"

"Okay," Jamy whispered.

"Well now," the Guardian said while stroking white whiskers, while flashing steel-blue eyes, "you will have Mama back, to love and cherish. You and your karmic brethren Sopwith and Bad George, plus the muse to be revived by me, will together realize your true purpose and assist Saint Jean-Jacques Cousteau. After . . ."

"Arf?" asked Parrot from his cage.

"Yes?" asked Jamy from his hell.

" . . . you see the authorities," I said from my cloud, "and tell them you want to restore a bird sanctuary for endangered species and that you require permission to wreck your eyesore house. Personally oversee burning your building, blasting your driveway, exploding your marina. Transfer Eagle Island to Egret Key Wetlands Conserving Society, and authorize me, its chairman, to have it made a nature reserve forever." I pointed at the door. "Dear boy, do that now!"

Jamy folded his hands. "And you will bring Mama back to me?"

I said I would do that small thing.

I released Parrot. Together we watched Jamy being reborn at the beginning of a busy day. Jamy, once he knows what it is he knows, knows how to get it going.

I rowed out to locate Mama. She hid at first but I had brought lunch and its good smells made her canoe float out from between mangrove roots.

"So our little plan won't work," she said after she had worked herself to the bottom of my hamper.

"It's working very well," I said. "How's the bleeding, Mama?"

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She blushed under her woman-of-the-islands tan. "A female complaint, Jannie. I'm of a certain age now, this granola life doesn't balance things out. It's either all or nothing."

I blushed, too. "No pregnancy gone wrong?"

"No," she said.

"It all just happened?" I asked. "You didn't find the old lady's dead body first, anchor it somewhere, then produce it at the right moment to set up your lover within a blackmail scheme?"

It all just happened again, Mangrove Mama cried, like everything always just happened. First she happened to collapse, bleeding, then the drunken woman's body banged the boat, then the blackmail plan blundered along.

"All is well," I said. "Jamy loves you."

I sang: *"One night, dancing in Mallory Square . . ."*

I pointed at her short hair. "Looks attractive."

Mama kept on crying.

"No need," I said. "Wait here some more. The prognosis is good."

That evening me and Bad George and Sopwith watched the fireworks on Eagle Island from my seawall.

"I'd like to help out there," Bad George said, "but Jamy will be mad at me, I think."

"Bad George," I murmured. "Fussing with a dead old lady and telling lies for money is not quite what your scoutmaster had in mind."

Bad George bowed his fat head and Sopwith did the Stan Laurel squeak again. They wanted to know when the sheriff was coming to pick them up.

"Angels don't squeal on pals," I said, "but there will have to be some changes."

Mangroves have taken over the island again.

Jamy returned from detox the other day. The white coats did a good job. The patient even quit smoking. Mangrove Mama helps him in restoring an old schooner. Bad George and Sopwith are on the job too, and the gang attends a Coast Guard navigation course. Whoever passes the exam first will be the *Saint Cousteau's* captain and take the vessel out on patrol, pursuing polluters, liberating whales from loose-floating nets.

Jamy says I can come along and watch.

Patiently waiting, I admire an eagle soaring above the cove, gliding down every now and then to check out the island. I installed, near the location where "Goldy" Yamamoto's T'ang temple once raised its roof, a wooden wheel on a post. It hasn't yet met with the bird's approval. ●

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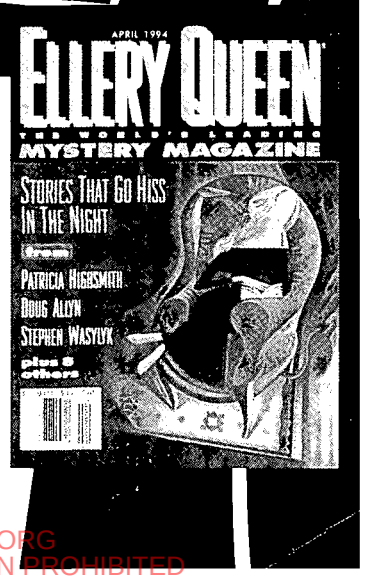

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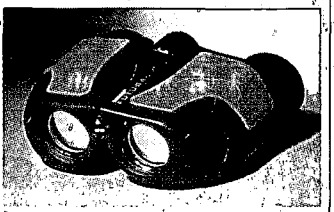

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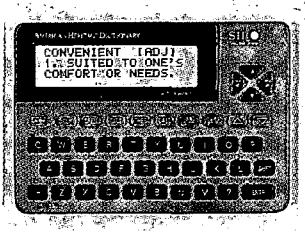

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